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# The Irish Identity

## Independence, History, and Literature

Course Guidebook

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# The Irish Identity

## Independence, History, and Literature

**B**eginning in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, a remarkable transformation occurred in Ireland. Following the terrible trauma of the Great Famine (1845–1849), Ireland experienced a surge of enthusiasm for both its ancient past and its current moment. The Celtic Revival featured a fascination for ancient Irish language and myth, artworks and literature, and the forgotten history of the pre-Christian Irish heritage. Major writers, such as W. B. Yeats, fueled this enthusiasm in poetry, essays, folklore collections, and cultural studies. At the same moment, the Home Rule movement, championed by the charismatic Charles Stewart Parnell, sought to establish Ireland's political independence from Great Britain, which had claimed Ireland as a colonial possession since the late 12<sup>th</sup> century. This enthusiasm and energy drove both the Irish Renaissance—the astonishing flowering of art, literature, culture, and achievement that flourished from 1890 to 1930—and the Irish independence movement—the sequence of conflicts and events that would culminate in Ireland's long-sought independence from Great Britain in 1922. Taken as a whole, this remarkable period in Irish history can be understood as the time when the Irish identity emerges in all its complexity and power.

In this course, we examine the full arc of Irish history, from its origins in the pre-Celtic period to the achievement of independence in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. We focus on the misty legends and mythologies of the first settlers in Ireland and on the rich Celtic culture of the Iron Age. We study the coming of Saint Patrick and the monastic period, followed by the invasions of the Vikings and the Normans. We examine the long struggle between Protestant England and Catholic Ireland and the centuries of conflict that to some extent still persists today. The triumphs of Georgian Ireland and

the suffering of the Catholic population, culminating in the Great Famine and the generations of Irish emigration, form a core concern of the lectures. Finally, we see how the 20<sup>th</sup> century brought these conflicts into climax in the defining events of the Easter Rising of 1916, the War of Independence of 1918 to 1922, and the tragic Civil War of 1922 to 1923. In this moving, tragic, yet inspiring history, the political independence of Ireland was achieved.

At the same time, the story of Ireland's cultural independence runs parallel to the story of its political independence. We learn about the grand mythologies and supernatural legends of the Celtic peoples, whose stories served as an inspiration to and source material for the period of the Irish Renaissance. We delve into the art and poetry of the monastic writers and learn of the rich cultural exchanges among the native Irish, the Vikings, and the waves of English invaders. The centuries of Irish poetry tell the stories of conflict, combat, love, and loss that reinforce and illuminate the history of Ireland through the years. We also study the great artistic achievements of the Irish: the Celtic crosses, which form a veritable Bible in stone; the glorious illuminated manuscripts, such as the magnificent Book of Kells, whose artistry and brilliance have never been surpassed; the torcs, bracelets, necklaces, and delicate gold jewelry of the pre-Christians and the carefully engraved chalices and crosses of the Christian era; the great stained-glass artists of the early 1900s, particularly the sublime work of Harry Clarke; and the achievements in painting by nearly two centuries of Irish artists, culminating in the astonishing work of Jack B. Yeats.

Ireland's emergence into a fully formed cultural identity occurs almost simultaneously as its emergence into full political freedom. This is the major period of the Irish Renaissance, which forms the central focus of this course. During the four decades of 1890 to 1930, some of the greatest European writers of the era emerge in Ireland: W. B. Yeats, perhaps the most significant poet in English of the entire modern era; Oscar Wilde, George Bernard Shaw, and John Millington Synge, three of the most influential playwrights of the period; Lady Augusta Gregory, a remarkable woman who produced important work in theatre, folklore, myth studies, and cultural criticism; and James Joyce, author of the renowned *Ulysses* and almost certainly the greatest writer of fiction of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In addition

to their individual achievements, these writers also created the Abbey Theatre, Ireland's first national theatre and one of the most significant dramatic spaces of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The achievements of these literary artists, and of many others who were swept up in this great period of cultural ferment, make the Irish Renaissance one of the most incredible periods of artistic and cultural definition in all of modern Europe. Through our study of the works, struggles, and triumphs of these writers, artists, and political leaders, we will see the long effort to achieve and express the essence of the Irish identity. ■

# Roots of Irish Identity: Celts to Monks

Over the course of these lectures, we will see how Irish identity developed, through many twists and turns, over the centuries. Irish identity is always multiple, always layered with invasions and migrations in one wave after another; it is an identity of astonishing resilience, marked by tremendous suffering and great experiences of joy. It is also defined by a love of nature and a powerful relationship with God. And it is best comprehended by closely examining both Irish history and the expressions of Irish history in the great literature, art, and craftwork of the Irish people.

## Early Irish Peoples

- Farming communities existed in Ireland as long as 5,000 years ago, during the Stone Age. The Irish landscape is marked by the presence of these people, particularly in their enormous burial sites. Perhaps the greatest example of such a site is the huge portal tomb at Poul Nabrone, in the far west of Ireland, which dates to perhaps the 4<sup>th</sup> millennium B.C.E.
  - The tomb stands more than 6 feet high and consists of two standing stones that support a 12-foot-long capstone. Beneath the portal lies a burial tomb or cairn, within which the remains of human beings were found.
  - The angle and position of the tomb suggest that it was oriented toward the cosmos, that the souls of the dead buried within the chamber were meant to be projected into the stars, releasing the souls from earth and returning them to the heavens.



How the portal tomb at Poul nabrone was constructed remains a mystery; how would ancient men have heaved such massive stones into place?

- Similar tombs, temples, and burial chambers exist throughout Ireland, and none is more spectacular than the monument at Newgrange. This site was built around 3100 B.C. and is located in the Boyne River valley, about 30 miles northwest of modern Dublin.
  - The site is a megalithic burial tomb, a raised mound of earth nearly 40 feet high and 250 feet long that extends over a full acre. It contains a burial chamber that runs for nearly 60 feet, where ancient human remains have been found. But it is much more than a tomb: Newgrange was surely a ceremonial center and a place of worship, communal gathering, astrological significance, and cultic and ritual events.
  - The outside of Newgrange is surrounded by nearly 100 massive kerbstones that are richly decorated with a variety of abstract art: chevrons, spirals, and more. Clearly, these



The monument at Newgrange was constructed by ancient farming communities that thrived in the rich valley land.

art forms reveal a culture that valued abstract art and the connections between human art and the cosmos.

- The true glory of Newgrange is the enormous burial chamber. As it extends back into the mound, multiple repositories line the sides. Here, it is likely that the bones of the dead princes and kings were deposited. The chamber is essentially a long, narrow tunnel, ending in a larger chamber that may have been reserved for the most elite rulers.
- Above the entrance door is a small stone box, with a carefully carved opening in the middle about the size of a large shoebox. On December 22, at dawn after the longest, darkest night of the year, the rising sun would shine through that small opening and slowly illuminate the entire chamber with dazzling light.

- Scholars speculate that the Newgrange builders were sun worshippers, who carefully constructed their ritual center so that at the moment of greatest darkness, they could experience the return of light. According to one scholar, the “cult of the dead,” believed that this return of the sun would return the bones of the ancestors to life, and death would be defeated for another year.
- Another site of special importance is the Hill of Tara, also located in the Boyne valley in the eastern part of Ireland. Tara is the legendary site of the Irish high kings, going back to the Celtic period in the Iron Age.
  - According to the 11<sup>th</sup>-century *Book of Invasions*, a pseudo-historical chronicle of the waves of invaders to Ireland, Tara had long been the seat of the high king, or *ard ri*. Archaeological excavations have revealed a number of structures and monuments that confirm Tara’s royal and symbolic significance.
  - A large enclosure stood atop the hill, where ceremonies and rituals would have taken place. A long avenue leads up to the summit; this was most likely a processional road for ritual ceremonies. At the top of the hill is the Lia Fail, or Stone of Destiny. According to legend, when the true king touched the Lia Fail, the stone would scream out in recognition of his hand.
  - Other earthworks and burial chambers suggest solar alignments similar to those at Newgrange, though Tara seems to be more aligned with the vernal and autumnal equinoxes, whereas Newgrange is aligned to the winter solstice.

## The Celtic Peoples

- The Celts were originally a northern European people who flourished from roughly the 7<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E. to about the 1<sup>st</sup> century B.C.E., when the expansion of the Roman Empire and the migrations of the Germanic and Slavic peoples constricted the

Celts to the western islands. The Celts entered Ireland, along with Wales and Scotland, perhaps as early as 500 B.C.E.

- Though the Celts have a somewhat savage reputation in popular thought, in fact, Celtic culture was rich and diverse and, in many ways, quite advanced.
  - The Celts had great skill in iron-making; their iron long-swords; *falcate*, or curved swords; battleaxes; javelins; spears; armor; and shields made them truly formidable in battle.
  - The Celts were also advanced in agriculture, hunting, warfare, and road-building. In fact, the famous Roman roads were often just expanded versions overlaid on the original Celtic road system.
  - Further, the Celts were gifted artists and craftsmen, particularly in jewelry, metalwork, and weaponry. Torcs (neck rings), bracelets, cauldrons, and necklaces were carefully and exquisitely wrought.
- The Celtic social structure was one of tribes and kings, governed by a system of laws and interpreted judgments called Brehon law, and their religion was a kind of earth and sun worship known generally as druidism. The druid was a combination of priest, astrologer, lawgiver, and poet, essentially a figure of knowledge and wisdom.
- The Celtic religion was a complex polytheism, with more than 400 named gods and goddesses. The greatest of the gods was the Dagda, both the destroyer and the creator. His club would kill if struck from one end and bring back to life if struck with the other.
  - The Dagda was a triple-god who could simultaneously create, preserve, and destroy. This tripartite structure of belief seems to have been deeply ingrained in Celtic spiritualism. The Celts viewed the human being as consisting of body, soul, and

spirit; they saw the world as consisting of three elements, earth, sea, and air; and they thought that the world of nature consisted of the animal, the vegetable, and the mineral.

- Many have speculated that this is one reason that the Celts embraced Christianity so readily: Its Trinitarian theology seemed an obvious and natural way to make sense of the divine.
- The Celts traced their origins to the great mother goddess Danu, meaning “the divine waters from heaven.” The goddess of fertility and life, she is associated with creation, maternity, and regeneration.
- Danu’s children were the Tuatha Dé Danann (“children of Danu”). They constitute the bountiful array of gods, goddesses, and heroes who eventually would form the major figures in Irish mythology.

## **Irish Monasteries**

- The first Christian missionaries came into the Celtic culture in the early 400s. The most famous of these, of course, was Saint Patrick. A Briton and a Roman citizen, born into a prosperous family, Patrick was kidnapped by Celtic slavers when he was 16 years old and spent the next six years as a slave in Ireland. There, he experienced a profound religious conversion. Escaping Ireland, he became a priest, then a bishop, and studied in Europe, where he developed the conviction that he must return to Ireland and bring the truth of Christianity to the people who had made him a slave.
- In 432, Patrick returned to Ireland and, for the next three decades, traversed virtually the entire country, establishing churches, appointing priests and bishops, spreading the word about the Christian God, and ministering to the Irish people.



According to one legend, Saint Patrick explained the Christian Trinity to the Irish using the three-leaved shamrock to communicate the mystery of three persons in a single God.

- Patrick was clearly a charismatic figure and an inspiring leader. It is remarkable that he achieved a virtually bloodless conversion and that in essentially a single generation, a pagan country became a Christian one.
- During this same period, Rome was sacked by the Visigoths, followed by the Vandals, and the so-called Dark Ages began in Europe.
  - Roman order was eroded, urban centers declined, libraries were destroyed, and the wealth and leisure on which learned civilization depends vanished before warfare and plunder. If this destruction had been complete, we would have lost virtually all of Greek and Roman poetry, history, science, oratory, and philosophy.

- But in Ireland, the treasures of classical culture were preserved. The remarkable institution that made this preservation possible was monasticism.
- In the century that followed Patrick's ministry, a series of saints founded monasteries that would thrive for the next 1,000 years. The Irish monastic system was remarkably well-suited to preserve the classical culture of Europe. The Irish monks were community makers: They established schools and spread literacy and learning throughout Ireland.
- In the scriptoria, the monks performed perhaps their most important labor: copying the great books of Greek and Roman culture, many brought to Ireland by monks fleeing the ravages of mainland Europe. In the centuries that followed, they would travel back to mainland Europe, returning with these texts and restoring classical culture to the ravaged land.
- The Irish monks not only transcribed the Greek and Latin of the classical age, but they also preserved the language and oral traditions of their own culture. They knew the Irish language and knew its great stories, legends, songs, and poems. In writing these works down, they preserved the oldest living vernacular in all of Europe.
- We see in the marginal poems and personal writings of these monks essential aspects of what we will come to see as the Irish identity: a love of nature; an endless search for God; a need for solitude, along with a powerful desire for community; and a dedication to learning and knowledge.
- This time of the Irish monasteries remains an idyllic and triumphant age in Irish history: the monks living in peace and harmony, preserving classical civilization and the Irish past. Yet, while this triumphant and heroic restoration of culture to mainland Europe was occurring, a new threat was appearing in Ireland itself, as yet another invading culture appeared. These, of course, were the

Northmen, the terrifying Vikings, whose arrival on the island would add a new dimension to the ever-evolving Irish identity.

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## Supplementary Reading

Cahill, *How the Irish Saved Civilization*.

Ellis, *The Celts*.

Harbison, *Pre-Christian Ireland*.

## Questions to Consider

1. The Celts brought a complex culture to Ireland whose influence is still felt today. What were some of the key characteristics of Celtic culture, and what were the most significant influences of that culture on Irish history?
2. What were the defining elements of Irish monasticism, and how did these elements make it possible for the Irish monks to “save” Western civilization?

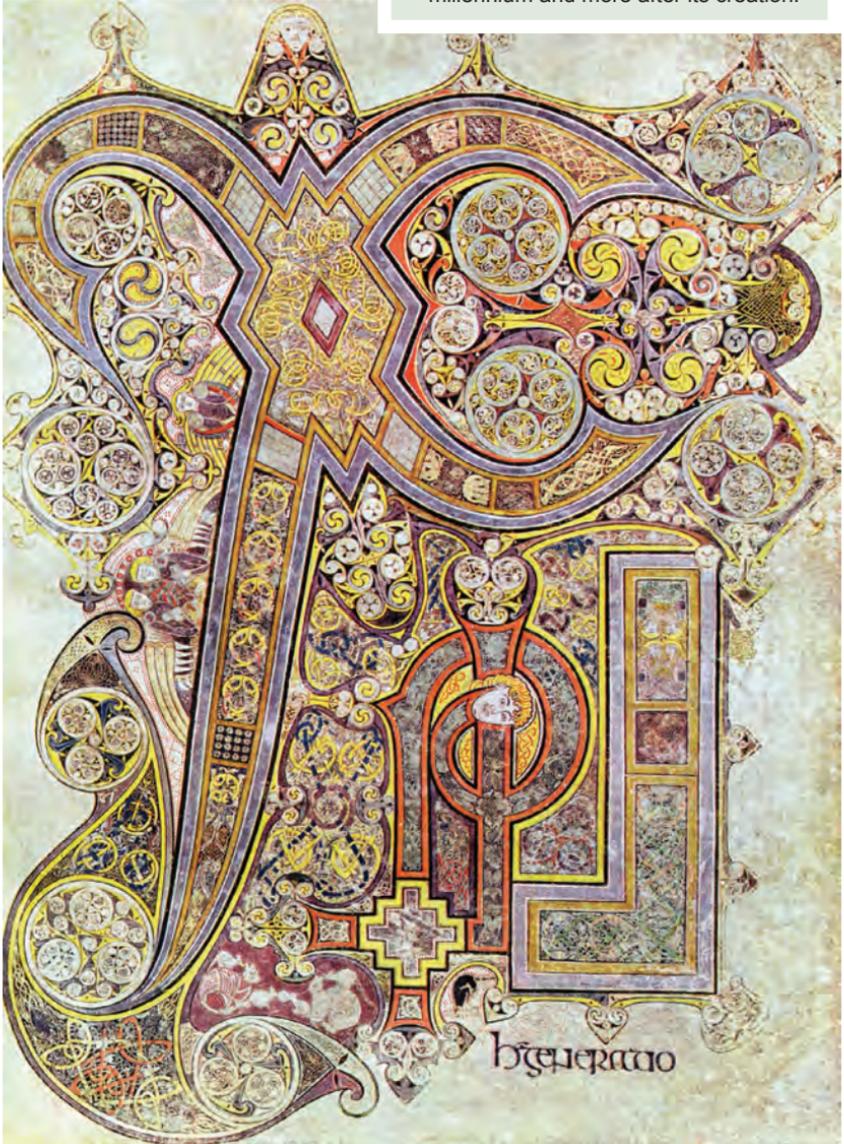
# Gaelic Ireland's Fall: Vikings to Cromwell

It must have been a startling sight, the first time an Irish monk looked out over the water from his coastal monastery and saw a Viking longboat approaching. Ireland had not had an invader, so to speak, since the Christian monks themselves in the early 5<sup>th</sup> century. But in 795, a Viking raid took place on Rathlin Island, off the Antrim coast in the northernmost part of Ireland, nearest to Scotland and Wales. For the next 300 years, the Vikings would be a constant part of the Irish political landscape.

## The Vikings

- Beginning with an initial raid in 795, the Vikings made the journey from Scandinavia to the Irish coasts in their longboats with increasing frequency. They would then sail up the rivers from the coast and plunder the wealthy Irish monasteries.
- The Vikings were extremely skilled at shipbuilding, and their longboats were sturdy enough for the sea journey yet also nimble enough to navigate the rivers and estuaries that would take them inland to the monastic settlements. Initially, the Vikings would arrive without warning, take all that could be carried away, and return to their Scandinavian homes.
- The fear of these ferocious attacks was palpable: Ninth-century monastic poetry is filled with fearful references to “the sharp warriors from the North.” But by the 800s, the Vikings were coming in greater numbers, and they were remaining in Ireland, beginning to build their own communities and to intermingle with the Irish.

The color and intricacy of the Book of Kells are remarkable even a millennium and more after its creation.



- At the time, Ireland was broken up into many distinct tribes or clans, each with its own king and each controlling its own territory. Often, these tribes would war against each other; some would contest the Viking invaders; and at times, the Vikings would war among themselves. Gradually, the Tara kings became dominant.

## **The Golden Age of Early Christian Art**

- Why did the Irish monasteries make such irresistible targets for the Norse invaders? The monks and their communities had become extraordinarily accomplished in the production of a wide range of arts and crafts. These art objects, along with the other wealth of the community, such as livestock, grain, and tools, were of immense value, as were the large numbers of potential slaves the Vikings could seize from these population centers.
- The artworks of this period reveal a culture supremely skilled in detailed craftsmanship and committed to the creation of beauty. Of course, the illuminated manuscripts are the glory of this monastic period. The unsurpassed Book of Kells of the early 9<sup>th</sup> century is certainly the example par excellence. Its illustrated panels reveal the continuing presence of the abstract and bestiary art of the Celtic period, along with the most accomplished Christian symbolism of the early Christian period.
- One of the remarkable elements of early Christian art in Ireland is how much it partakes of pre-Christian traditions, such as the spirals, chevrons, twists, and bestiary imagery of Celtic art and stonework. Nowhere is this blend of the pagan and Christian more evident than in the high crosses that are a unique feature of Irish monasteries. These high crosses were a kind of holy text, illustrated with images and stories from the Old and New Testaments.



Many have speculated that the central feature of the high cross—the combination of circle and cross—suggests a melding of pagan sun worship with early Christianity.

## The English Conquest of Ireland

- Rather than possessing a single truly authoritative figure, Ireland in the 12<sup>th</sup> century featured several kings or chieftains who often warred with one another. In the mid-1100s, precisely such a dispute changed the course of Irish history and identity forever.
- Dermot Macmurrough, the king of Leinster, in the eastern province of Ireland, fell in love with the wife of O'Rourke, the king of Breifne in the northern midlands. He eloped with her, thereby causing

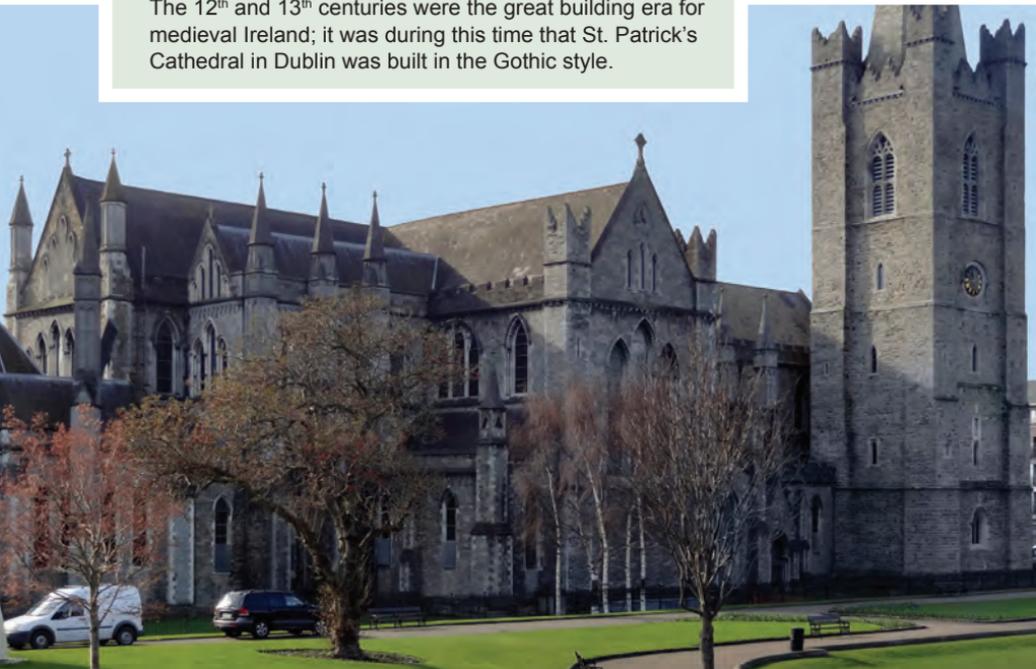
Rory O'Connor, the titular high king of Ireland, to attack him. MacMurrough was defeated and sought aid from King Henry II, the Norman king of England. Henry sent a force to Ireland that defeated O'Connor in a series of battles; in 1175, O'Connor formally surrendered to Henry. Thus, the English conquest of Ireland began.

- King Henry II was actually the ruler of a vast territory that included most of modern-day France, as well as England, Scotland, and Wales. His main home was Normandy, and he spoke French. It was only in the next century that his son would be defeated by the French and the empire would split in two, leaving the Plantagenets as rulers over England.
- The Catholic Church was eager to have Henry invade Ireland because the Irish bishops and monasteries were far too independent. Moreover, a gathering of Irish priests who favored the rule of the Roman Church actually welcomed Henry's arrival and created a new constitution for the Irish Church that placed it firmly under Rome's control.
- The Norman armies were not, in fact, led by Henry but by Richard de Clare, the earl of Pembroke, commonly known by his nickname, Strongbow. Strongbow agreed to come to MacMurrough's aid in exchange for two things: first, the promise of MacMurrough's daughter, Aoife, in marriage; and second, the succession to the kingship of Leinster.
- Strongbow assembled a small army of Norman warriors, probably the finest fighters of the time. Though the native Irish and Norse forces put up a spirited defense, soon, Strongbow was in possession of Dublin and much of the eastern province of Ireland; he had also married MacMurrough's daughter and claimed the kingship of Leinster.
- The prospect of a powerful baron with an experienced army sitting on his back doorstep did not please Henry II. Thus, Henry himself

came to Ireland with his own army, and each faction paid him homage and accepted him as king. In the Treaty of Windsor of 1175, Henry was recognized as overlord of Ireland.

- Soon, Henry's Norman followers had claimed vast tracts of land in Ireland, and the building of the great Norman towers and castles began. Today, 3,000 of these Norman castles remain in the countryside of Ireland. Around these castles, the Normans eventually developed towns and trade, as well.
- With the Norman conquest imposing a kind of political structure on 12<sup>th</sup>-century Ireland, there soon followed a second conquest, that of the great European monastic orders. The Cistercians, Benedictines, and Augustinians came immediately after the Normans, followed by the Franciscans and Dominicans.
- Magnificent churches and monasteries were constructed throughout Ireland, such as the Cistercian monastery Corcomroe Abbey in County Clare. Here, the new building style is evident: an

The 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries were the great building era for medieval Ireland; it was during this time that St. Patrick's Cathedral in Dublin was built in the Gothic style.



open square in the center, surrounded by the church, the sacristy, the refectory and kitchen, and above them, the living quarters for the monks.

- The Normans adopted many of the customs and characteristics of the native Irish and mingled with the native Irish chieftains, a situation that led to unease in England. In 1366, King Edward III passed the Statutes of Kilkenny. This set of 35 acts outlawed marriage between English and Irish, made it a crime to speak Irish instead of English, rejected the Irish Brehon law and enforced English common law, and outlawed Irish oral culture.
- In reality, the English were not able to enforce the statutes. By 1500, the English had secure control only of the area around Dublin, known as the Pale, and everything outside that—"beyond the pale"—was in native Irish and Anglo-Irish hands. Nevertheless, the new laws signified the English anxiety about the Irish culture, law, and language.

## **The Protestant Reformation**

- In 1534, King Henry VIII broke with the Catholic Church and declared that he was the supreme head of the English church. This rejection of Rome's authority led to the establishment of the Church of England or Anglican Church. England became a Protestant nation.
- Across the Irish Sea, the native Irish and many of the Anglo-Irish aristocracy refused to follow this split from Rome. In this way, the division between Irish and English also became a division between Catholic and Protestant.
- This religious divide created turmoil in both English and Irish politics throughout the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. Mary Tudor restored Catholicism for a time, then Queen Elizabeth restored Protestantism. Under Elizabeth's rule, the Acts of Supremacy and Uniformity were passed in Ireland in 1560, making the Anglican Church the "official" Irish church (now called the Church of

Ireland). The acts enforced strict Anglican rule and suppressed the rights and privileges of Catholics.

- Such policies resulted in several rebellions in the late 16<sup>th</sup> century by Irish and Anglo-Irish aristocratic families.
  - In Munster, in the southwest section of Ireland, the ruling kingdom of the Desmonds rebelled in a war that lasted from 1579 to 1583.
  - Even more prominent was the rebellion of the O'Neills of Ulster in the north, who won a great victory over the English at the Battle of the Yellow Ford in 1598.
  - In Munster, where the Fitzgeralds had been broken a generation earlier, the remaining Irish rose up in rebellion against the new colonists, and for a time, there was hope of a full-scale overthrow of English rule.
- All hopes rested on a force from Spain that was sent to support the Irish rebels as part of the larger continental conflict between England and Spain.
  - At the Battle of Kinsale in 1601, however, the Spanish garrison surrendered, and the Irish leaders, O'Neill and O'Donnell, fled back to Ulster. This battle was the decisive defeat of the old Gaelic chieftains and the triumph of the Elizabethan efforts to conquer and resettle Ireland.
  - The entirety of the north—what became known as the Ulster Plantation—was now open to resettlement, and large numbers of Scottish Presbyterians flooded into the area. These radical Protestants were known as dissenters, and gradually, they became a third party in Anglo-Irish politics, along with native Irish Catholics and ruling British Anglicans.

## The Protectorate

- In the midst of this already oppressive assault on Irish culture, another transformative event in English history was to have profound consequences for Ireland. In the 1640s, under Oliver Cromwell, the most radical English Protestants, the Puritans, rose to power in England, beheading King Charles I and establishing the Commonwealth with Cromwell as lord protector (a virtual dictatorship).
- Cromwell subsequently invaded Ireland, conducting the brutal siege of Drogheda, in which the entire garrison was put to death, and the siege of Wexford, in which his army killed 2,000 Irish after surrender had begun. Cromwell then began a series of ruthless campaigns of suppression of Catholics, seizures of their estates, evictions to the poorest parts of Ireland, and destruction of their churches.
- Although some of Cromwell's tactics were in keeping with European military practice, his ruthless suppression of Catholicism was exceptional. Estimates suggest that the total number of Irish killed or put into "service" (essentially slavery) was in the hundreds of thousands. To this day, Cromwell is the most reviled figure in the Republic of Ireland.

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## Supplementary Reading

Arnold, *Irish Art*.

O Croinin, *Early Medieval Ireland, 400–1200*.

Richter, *Medieval Ireland*.

## Questions to Consider

1. What are some of the defining characteristics of early Irish art? How do these artworks reflect both the Christian and pre-Christian traditions that created them?

2. The Norman Conquest in the late 12<sup>th</sup> century transformed Ireland in multiple ways. What were the key effects of this conquest? How did the Normans mingle with the Irish, and what ultimately brought about the greater split between the English occupiers and the Irish natives?

# The Penal Laws and Protestant Ascendancy

Oliver Cromwell died in 1658, and the monarchy was restored two years later, with Charles II on the throne. After Charles's death in 1685, he was succeeded by his brother James II, who had converted to Catholicism in 1670. The Irish hoped that James would show tolerance for Catholicism, perhaps even restoring Catholic rule to the empire. But the British Parliament had no confidence in James and tried repeatedly to have him stripped of succession. These efforts failed, and James's actions in appointing Catholics to positions of political and military power did nothing to ease Parliament's concerns. Parliament then turned to William of Orange, the great leader of Protestant Europe against the French Catholic monarchy.

## Restoration of the Monarchy

- James II, who had converted to Catholicism in 1670, succeeded to the throne of England in 1685. But Parliament didn't trust James and took its concerns to the man who had married James's daughter Mary, William of Orange. When James's second wife gave birth to a son, thereby insuring a Catholic succession, William was invited to lead an army to England.
- William and Mary were given the crown, and James fled to Ireland, where he declared toleration for all religions and formed an army. His followers became known as Jacobites, and their support for the Stuart claim to the throne would extend into the mid-1700s in both Ireland and Scotland.

- William invaded Ireland in June 1690, and on July 1, he engaged James's troops in the Boyne River valley north of Dublin. William's forces outnumbered James's 36,000 to 25,000. They outflanked James's troops, causing James to overreact and leave his front depleted; soon, James fled the battlefield.
- The next year, the Battle of Aughrim took place in the west of Ireland, across the Shannon River. James had left Ireland for Europe, and his army was commanded by the Marquis de Saint Ruth, a French general of great skill. But the marquis was killed early in the battle, and the Williamite forces routed James's army, killing more than 7,000 men.
- This was the key defeat, ending James's hopes of regaining the crown and dashing Irish hopes of a Catholic restoration. The stalwart Irish leader Patrick Sarsfield concluded that continued fighting was hopeless. He signed the Treaty of Limerick in October 1691, which allowed Irish soldiers to leave Ireland with impunity and serve abroad in the European armies that had Irish units.
- This "Flight of the Wild Geese" meant that nearly 14,000 Irish soldiers left the island, an evacuation of men and arms that eliminated any possibility of Irish resistance to British rule. Even so, hopes for a Stuart return persisted well into the 1700s, when they became focused on the person of James's grandson, Bonnie Prince Charlie. Hopes for a Stuart Restoration finally ended with the defeat of the Scots in the Battle of Culloden in 1745.
- During this period, Irish folk poetry would frequently express a sense of defeat and the crushing of the native culture. The most famous poem from this period is by the great Irish poet Aogán Ó Rathaille. Titled "*Gile na Gile*" or "Brightness Most Bright," it imagines Ireland as a beloved woman who has been wronged, even ravished, by an invader.
- The 17<sup>th</sup> century ended with Ireland defeated and largely at the mercy of its conqueror, and the 18<sup>th</sup> century became a period

of long suffering and dismay. With most of the old Catholic landowners either exiled to Europe or stripped of their holdings, and with virtually the entire soldiery killed or fled, the remaining Catholic population was reduced to a miserable peasantry. Thus began the era of the Penal Laws.

## The Penal Laws

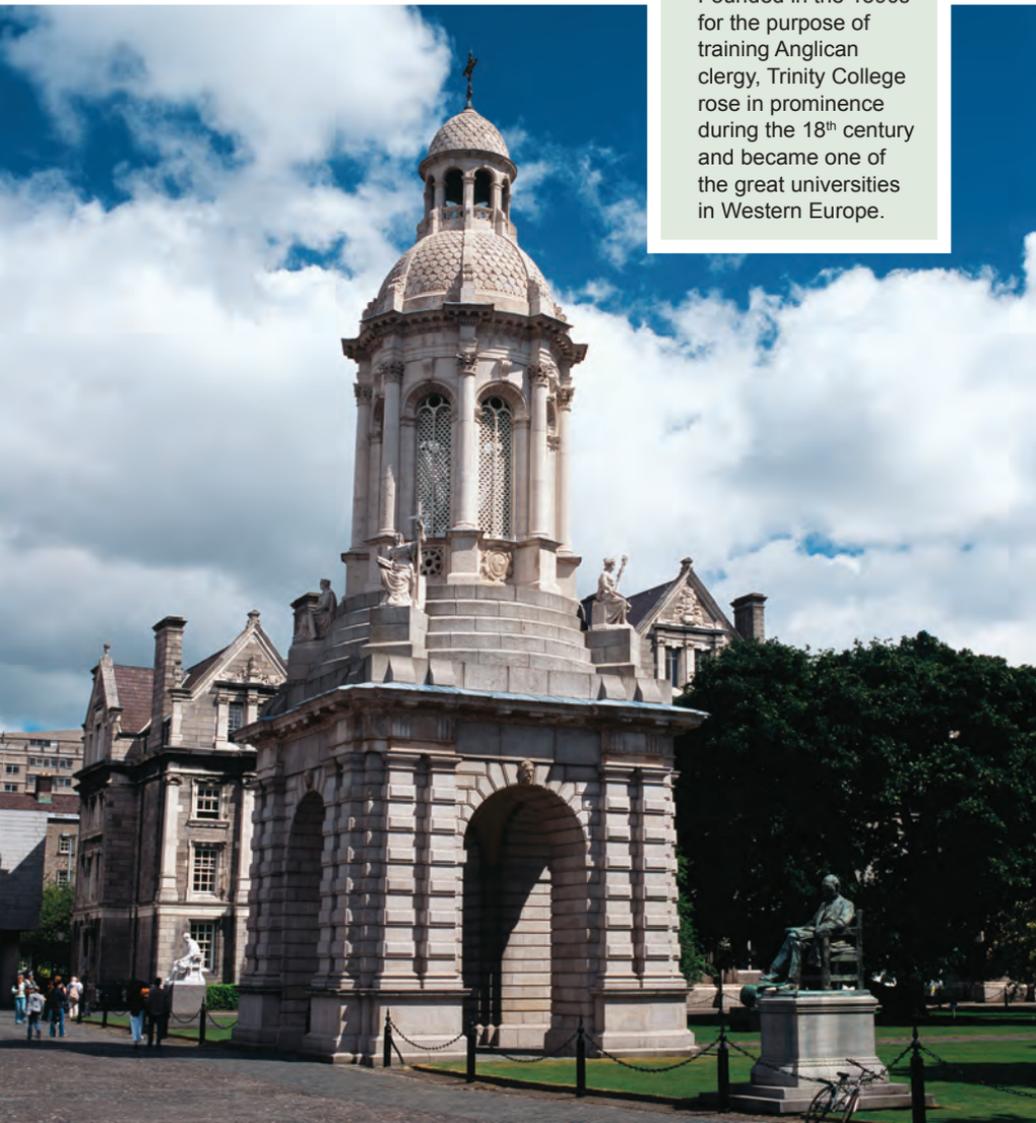
- The Williamite Parliament declared the Oath of Supremacy in 1691: Anyone sitting in government had to swear allegiance to the monarch as both the head of state and the head of the Church of England. Because no Catholic could take this oath in good conscience, Catholics were excluded from government.
- Soon, a series of other restrictions flowed through the English Parliament. For example, the Banishment Act of 1697 forced most bishops and hundreds of priests out of the country. Many Catholic churches were converted to Protestant churches, and masses often had to be celebrated outdoors and almost in secret.
- Catholics could not hold local government offices, nor could they enter such professions as law or medicine; they were excluded from holding officers' commissions in the armed forces and could not possess weapons; Catholic education was outlawed; and a series of acts were passed that effectively prohibited Catholics from inheriting their fathers' lands.
- But Irish culture and identity did not die. Although the old bardic order and the ancient *file*, or poets, of the great Irish families were no more, still, folk culture was kept alive.
  - Poets, balladeers, and traveling musicians roamed the land and played at the crossroads and villages and in private homes. The Irish language and traditions of learning were sustained in the famous hedge schools, where pupils would gather clandestinely wherever a teaching master could meet them.

- One of the most famous of all Irish-language poems also emerged from this time. This is “The Lament for Art O’Leary,” written by O’Leary’s wife after he was found dead, probably for a violation of the Penal Laws and probably at the hands of a sheriff’s bodyguard. “The Lament” is a classic Irish *caoineadh*, or keen, in which the living bewail the loss of a loved one.
- The economic reality for most native Irish in the 18<sup>th</sup> century was bleak: The bulk of the population was essentially peasantry, forced to pay high rents because of the rising population and the scarcity of land, as well as tithes to support the “established” (that is, Anglican) church. There was virtually no industry to develop new employment or trade.
- Further, many of the landlords were absentee, living in England and collecting Irish rents through overseers; they were not present to tend to their estates or show concern for their tenants.
- English protectionism also ensured that Irish goods, such as woolens, cattle, and dairy products, could not compete with trade from England.
- The members of the ruling Anglo-Irish Protestant class were descendants of some of the oldest Anglo-Irish families who had switched their loyalties to the Protestant Church over the centuries and now were firmly established as great landowning families. Their political and social dominance during the 18<sup>th</sup> century gives this period its name, the Protestant Ascendancy.
  - This was the time of Georgian Ireland, so named for its architectural and cultural achievements during the reigns of George I through George IV (1714–1830).
  - During this time, Ireland had its own parliament, which meant that all the social functions attendant upon a parliament occurred in Dublin and the surrounding countryside.

## Anglo-Irish Literature

- With the political situation stabilized, the 18<sup>th</sup> century became a relatively peaceful and prosperous time for Ireland. The achievements of the ruling class actually accomplished much that was good for Ireland. Anglo-Irish literature also flourished during

Founded in the 1590s for the purpose of training Anglican clergy, Trinity College rose in prominence during the 18<sup>th</sup> century and became one of the great universities in Western Europe.

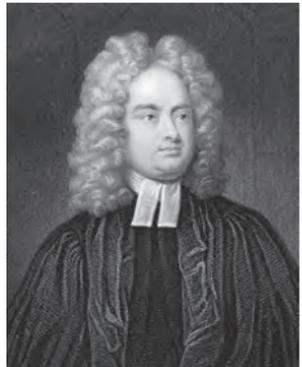


this time, as a number of Anglo-Irish writers took their places among the top writers of the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

- One of these writers was Oliver Goldsmith, who laid the groundwork for Irish writers to be successful in the London theatre world, particularly with his play *She Stoops to Conquer*. In his poetry, Goldsmith reveals his Irish inheritance. For example, “The Deserted Village” evokes the charms and beauty of traditional village life. The poem also addresses the passing of this traditional life to the new economics of agriculture and hints at the coming of the industrial age.
- If Goldsmith showed some sympathy for his native land, the great Jonathan Swift went much further in his commitment to being an Anglo-Irish writer. Swift longed for the cosmopolitan culture of London, yet at the same time, no writer has been so passionately dedicated to the plight of Ireland.
  - In 1704, Swift published his first great satire, “A Tale of a Tub,” a massive, complex, witty narrative that attacks the tendency in Christianity to lose the essence of the Christian message in debate, detail, and schism. Swift had ample opportunity to observe such division among



Oliver Goldsmith eventually became part of the celebrated circle surrounding the great English man of letters Samuel Johnson.



Jonathan Swift channeled his rage against the unjust situation of the Irish poor into his writing, ultimately producing 75 works on Irish issues during his lifetime.

the Anglican, Catholic, and Puritan controversies that defined English and Irish history during his time.

- Swift had ambitions to be a writer and a public intellectual in England. But his political allies were all on the Tory side of government, which fell from power with the death of Queen Anne in 1714. Swift was then granted the position of dean of St. Patrick's Cathedral in Dublin.
- Swift keenly felt the plight of the urban poor in Dublin. He came to sympathize greatly with his native countrymen, and for the rest of his life, he would dedicate himself to helping the desperate situation of the Irish poor.
- Swift's most famous work on Irish issues is "A Modest Proposal" from 1729. Here, he mockingly argues that the best solution to the overcrowding of Dublin and the prevalence of the poor would be to eat Irish children as a delicacy. This is vicious satire, making the point that England, through its colonial oppression and subjection of Ireland, was doing precisely that: eating the Irish young before they even had a chance at life.
- Satire was Swift's natural medium. He viewed it as both a political and a moral statement of values. He mocked the intellectual excesses of religion, urging the middle way of Anglicanism, and he mocked England's insistence on subjugating Ireland. But more than anything, Swift mocked the pretensions of humanity: our pretensions to know ourselves better than we really do, to understand what is holy better than God does, and to flatter ourselves with stories that shield us from the ugly truths we cannot bear to see.
- Swift counters these pretensions by holding a mirror up to humanity—the mirror of his satire. Nowhere is he more effective than in his most famous work, *Gulliver's Travels*, published in 1726. The book is simply remarkable: It's an early

example of the English novel, a travel narrative, a fantasy story, and an adventure tale. Above all, it is a trenchant political and moral satire, bringing into relief humanity's deepest desires and gravest sins.

- In his famous speech before the Irish Senate in 1925, W. B. Yeats claimed kinship with the Anglo-Irish Protestant class and insisted upon the cultural achievements of the 18<sup>th</sup>-century Protestant Ascendancy. These achievements certainly stand as one of the great moments in Irish culture and a major part of the Irish identity. However, as the 19<sup>th</sup> century would demonstrate, this ascendancy was built on injustice, an injustice that would require great suffering and tragedy before it would be replaced by justice.

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## Supplementary Reading

Fitzpatrick, *Seventeenth-Century Ireland*.

McBride, *Eighteenth-Century Ireland*.

Swift, *Gulliver's Travels*.

## Questions to Consider

1. Irish history and Irish poetry are interwoven throughout the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, with the poetry responding to the history and the history informing the poetry. How did the poets clarify or intensify the historical experiences of Ireland during this time?
2. The Protestant Ascendancy is a contested era in Irish history. In what ways was the ascendancy a triumph for Irish culture, and in what ways did this period and class constitute a bleak element in Ireland's history?

# Ireland at the Turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century

The Protestant Ascendancy seemed to be a period of stability and control for Irish government. But the 18<sup>th</sup> century was also the Age of Revolution, and England watched anxiously as the American colonies and the French overthrew traditional rule and instituted republican governments. The most vociferous voice of opposition to the French Revolution in England was that of Edmund Burke. Burke foresaw the violence of the Reign of Terror and the dictatorship that ensued from the apparent egalitarian impulse of the movement. Though Burke favored Catholic emancipation for Ireland, he was deeply concerned about how the French Revolution might affect the Irish situation.

## The Age of Revolution

- In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, England was uneasy with the revolutions taking place in the American colonies and in France. In particular, France threatened English interests, because as a Catholic country, it had long held ties to the Irish and supported Ireland in its resistance to France's oldest enemy, England.
- The American Revolution was also unsettling, because structurally, the American colonies resembled Ireland's situation. They both had a representative assembly; both complained that the central government in London imposed its will on them unjustly; and of course, many of the colonists were of Irish ancestry. But the Irish Parliament supported British policy in America and even sent its own military units to the colonies.

- This left Ireland relatively unguarded from a French or Spanish invasion; thus, the first volunteer militias began to form, starting a tradition that would be pivotal in the early 1900s with the War of Independence and the Civil War. Indeed, even in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Troubles in Northern Ireland would essentially be waged between “volunteer” militias, now called paramilitary organizations, such as the Ulster Freedom Fighters and the Provisional Irish Republican Army.
  
- English unease over the possibility of revolution in Ireland led to some loosening of the restrictions on the Irish, particularly the laws restricting free trade. Further, the Irish Parliament was strengthened and made more independent, and the Penal Laws were lessened.
  
- Ireland found a compelling voice for independence in Henry Grattan, who entered Parliament in 1775 and, for decades, labored for Irish legislative freedom. Through Grattan’s leadership, the Irish Parliament brought about the repeal of Poynings’ Law, which mandated that any Irish legislation also had to be approved by the British government. Grattan then turned to further reforms and to securing the vote for Irish Catholics.
  
- But there were many Irish who still chafed at British rule and who viewed the events in France and America with admiration and a sense that the modern tide of history was arriving.
  - In 1791, in both Belfast and Dublin, a new organization was formed called the Society of United Irishmen, led by the Anglo-Irish lawyer Wolfe Tone. This group combined elements of American and French republicanism with British Commonwealth doctrine and Irish patriotic fervor.
  
  - It was composed of Presbyterian, Protestant, and Catholic elements, who initially aimed at a unified Ireland of all religious denominations.

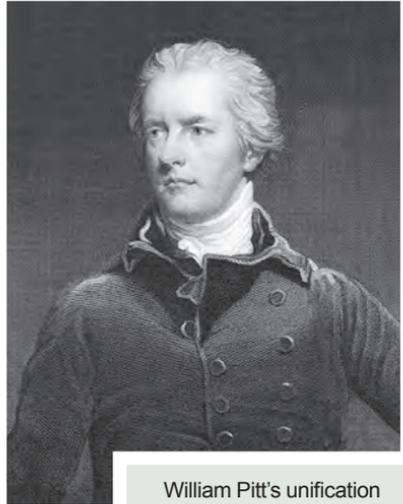
## The United Irishmen

- At first, the United Irishmen sought parliamentary and voting reform, but over time, they shifted to more confrontational strategies. They organized into military units and sought support from France, which was now at war with England.
- Tone believed that a French invasion of Ireland could be successful and worked to bring this action about. In December 1796, a French fleet of 14,000 men attempted an invasion, but winter storms scattered the fleet, and the invasion failed. Yet it demonstrated to the British the threat of a European invasion aided by an Irish rebellion. The British used their intelligence-gathering networks to place a spy in the United Irishmen leadership and were soon aware of the group's plans for insurrection.
- Despite British counterinsurgency measures, the United Irishmen rose up in June 1798. But their efforts were badly coordinated and mostly amounted to isolated skirmishes. Only in County Wexford did the rebellion gain any traction. But even there, the rebels were ultimately put to flight after a fierce fight at Vinegar Hill.
- Two months later, a small French fleet landed at Killala in County Mayo, but the invaders were quickly put down. Finally, in October 1798, a French force of 3,000 men approached, with Tone in command; they were captured, and Tone was taken to a military court in Dublin. He was convicted, but before he could be executed, he died mysteriously while in English custody. Tone remains the foundational figure for Irish republicanism, the powerful impulse behind much of the conflict in Northern Ireland over the last 50 years.
- Robert Emmet was another leader of the United Irishmen who worked in the aftermath of the 1798 debacle to foment a new revolt. In 1803, he attempted to capture Dublin Castle, hoping that the Irish population would rise up in a spontaneous revolt and that aid would come from France. His attempt was quickly put down, and Emmet and 21 other leaders were executed within a month.

- These defeats marked the end of the United Irishmen and of significant Irish armed rebellion until the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. But the Irish Rebellion of 1798 remained in the Irish imagination as another lost effort at independence.

## The Act of Union

- In the wake of Tone's rebellion, the British government was no longer willing to let Ireland remain in its current state—loosely governed, difficult to control, and ruled locally by an embattled minority. Thus, in 1801, the British prime minister, William Pitt, decided to unite the Irish and English parliaments in the Act of Union.
  - This meant that the Irish Parliament would essentially be absorbed into the much larger imperial center of Westminster in London.
  - In effect, this was a military necessity: England could not control Ireland's potential for rebellion or for aiding foreign enemies through the independent Irish Parliament. Only direct rule would, Pitt believed, provide sufficient control to ensure the safety of the home country.
- To members of the Irish Parliament—who were all Protestants—the argument made sense and was the only way to preserve their power and privilege, yet many opposed the union. Led by Grattan, they argued that Ireland needed independent rule, and they rejected the first vote for the Act of Union. Many were later



William Pitt's unification of the English and Irish parliaments was believed a necessity to provide for the safety of England.

convinced to vote for the union through an elaborate system of compensation and the promise of future patronage.

- In January 1801, Ireland's government was merged with that of England into the United Kingdom, meaning that all Irish political matters were decided by the British Parliament in London. Under the act, the Irish would send 32 peers to the House of Lords and 100 MPs to the House of Commons. Many Irish Catholics supported the act, believing that Catholic emancipation would soon follow. In this, they were disappointed.
- Again, for the British and the bulk of the Protestant Ascendancy in Ireland, this was virtually a military necessity: The threat of a native Catholic uprising was so forceful that the British were convinced that the only way to maintain control of the country was through military strength.
  - Moreover, Britain knew that Ireland was the weak link in its own national defenses: Enemies of England, particularly France, could land in Ireland and be only a channel's crossing away from the English countryside.
  - Ironically, the long-term effect of the union would be to diminish the power of Ireland's native ruling Protestant class and embolden the growing Catholic middle and lower classes. The slow decline of the Protestant Ascendancy and the growing discontent of the Catholic middle class would be the dominant pattern of Irish political life in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

## Irish Culture

- What was happening with Irish culture during this time? One of the amazing stories of the 18<sup>th</sup> century is the survival of Irish music despite the duress of the Penal Laws. Even though the great houses were gone and patronage of the bards, *file*, and harpers had vanished, still, the musical tradition persisted.



The most hallowed of the Irish traditional instruments is the harp, *clairseach*, which goes all the way back to the Celtic period.

- The ancient bardic order had three levels: the *file*, who composed the poem; the reciter, who would perform it; and the harper, who would accompany the poetic recitation. After the Flight of the Earls and the decline of the old Gaelic princes, the harpers became wandering musicians. The most famous of the harpers was Turlough O'Carolan. The oral folk tradition kept O'Carolan's songs alive throughout the century.
- As the 19<sup>th</sup> century began, there were signs that Irish culture was returning and even taking on new life. Two very different poets embody the two strains of Irish culture at this time: Antony Raftery, a wandering poet who hearkened back to the ancient oral traditions, and Thomas Moore, who embraced a new tradition that combined Irish Gaelic culture with English and European modes.
  - Although Raftery wrote many kinds of poems, he is most remembered for a simple love poem that praises the remarkable beauty of a local country girl, Mary Hynes. The

### **Excerpt from "Praise of Mary Hynes"**

by Antony Raftery

Going to Mass by the will of God, the day came wet and the wind rose; I met Mary Hynes at the cross of Kiltartan, and I fell in love with her there and then. I spoke to her kind and mannerly, as by report was her own way; and she said "Raftery my mind is easy; you may come to-day to Ballylee."

O star of light and O sun in harvest; O amber hair, O my share of the world! Will you come with me on the Sunday, till we agree together before all the people?

I would not begrudge you a song every Sunday evening; punch on the table or wine if you would drink it. But O King of Glory, dry the roads before me till I find the way to Ballylee.

song is all the more poignant because Raftery was blind; he praises a beauty he cannot see.

- Moore's most famous work is *Irish Melodies*, a collection of his original lyrics, set to the music of traditional Irish airs, songs, and poems. Moore employed a slightly archaic, charming, poetic English in the ballad form common to English poetry. The songs can certainly be sentimental and nostalgic, yet they are also deeply moving and quite lovely, suffused with a sense of national dignity and pride.

**“The Harp That Once through Tara’s Halls”**

by Thomas Moore

The Harp that once through Tara’s halls  
The soul of music shed,  
Now hangs as mute on Tara’s walls  
As if that soul were fled.

So sleeps the pride of former days,  
So glory’s thrill is o’er,  
And hearts, that once beat high for praise,  
Now feel that pulse no more.

No more to chiefs and ladies bright  
The harp of Tara swells:  
The chord alone, that breaks at night,  
Its tale of ruin tells.

Thus Freedom now so seldom wakes,  
The only throb she gives,  
Is when some heart indignant breaks,  
To show that still she lives.

- Two other poets who would have a great influence on modern Irish writers were James Clarence Mangan and Samuel Ferguson.
    - Mangan’s work always had somewhere within it the symbol of Ireland betrayed or Ireland wronged. He translated many Irish-language poems and would often create new poems by blending his voice with that of long-dead Gaelic poets. Perhaps his most famous poem is “Dark Rosaleen,” in which he seems to address his love but is really talking about Ireland; he urges his country to be brave and to hope for help from her European allies.
    - Ferguson also translated Irish work but mainly the great ancient Irish epics and mythic tales, which he would also render in English-language poetry, such as “The Burial of King Cormac,” “Deirdre’s Lament for the Sons of Usnach,” and “The Death of Dermid.” Ferguson’s work had a great influence on Yeats, who admired his treatment of the great figures, stories, and themes from the Irish mythic past.
  - During the 1800s, Ireland was struggling to regain its cultural independence and to keep alive its ancient traditions in poetry and music. These efforts parallel the historical drama of the time, as Ireland emerged from the Penal Laws into a new political identity. The contesting claims to Irishness by the United Irishmen and the Anglo-Irish ruling class embodied the tensions of this period.
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## Supplementary Reading

Gahan, *The People’s Rising*.

Gregory, *Poets and Dreamers*.

Moore, *Moore’s Irish Melodies*.

## Questions to Consider

1. What were some of the key elements that led to the 1798 rising? Why was this rising unsuccessful in its efforts to overthrow British rule?

2. The two poets Anthony Raftery and Thomas Moore were very different in their approaches to Irish poetry. How do their differences reveal key distinctions in Irish culture and identity during the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries?

# Daniel O’Connell and the Great Famine

In the annals of the struggle for Irish independence, few names stand out more or garner greater praise and affection than that of Daniel O’Connell, the Liberator. O’Connell has a status in Ireland comparable to Martin Luther King Jr. in America or Mahatma Gandhi in India—two men whom he greatly influenced through his ideas and his methods of political organization and nonviolence. Indeed, one historian has named the period between the Act of Union in 1801 and the Great Famine in 1845 as the “Age of Daniel O’Connell,” so thoroughly did O’Connell put his stamp on the time.



In addition to achieving Catholic emancipation, Daniel O’Connell also supported the 1833 act that freed all slaves in the British Empire, advocated for abolition in the United States, and argued for women’s rights and religious toleration.

## Daniel O’Connell

- The O’Connells were an ancient family from County Kerry in the far southwest of Ireland. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, O’Connell’s grandfather built up a thriving property in Kerry, and eventually, the O’Connells had extensive land and incomes. O’Connell’s uncle Muiris was the heir to the estate. Because he had no children, he adopted Daniel, and when Muiris died in 1825, the estate passed to Daniel.

- Born in 1775, O'Connell was educated by private tutors, then continued his studies in France. During his time there, he witnessed the excitement and the horrors of the French Revolution and its violent aftermath, which confirmed his commitment to peace and nonviolence. He studied law in London and, in 1798, was called to the Irish bar, just six years after the law forbidding Catholics to practice law was lifted.
- Though the worst of the Penal Laws had been abolished, Catholics still could not hold senior offices in the civil service, sit in Parliament, or be commanding officers in the military. But O'Connell refused to believe that armed rebellion could solve these problems. Irish freedom had to be achieved through political agitation and the changing of hearts and minds.
- For O'Connell, the defining cause of his career would be Catholic emancipation. This was a growing movement in the early 1800s, but it had no unity and no common cause. It was led by a small group of Catholic middle-class landowners and tradesmen, but they had little clout. O'Connell's great insight was to get the weight of all Irish Catholics, including the peasantry, behind the emancipation movement.

## **The Catholic Association**

- In 1823, O'Connell founded the Catholic Association, which every Catholic could join by paying a single penny per month. Spread out over a population in the millions, this soon filled the coffers of the movement and enabled the campaign for emancipation to spread. In addition, O'Connell made the local parish priests the organizers of the movement, lending it a legitimacy and even spiritual inspiration.
- O'Connell set his sights on the process of election. Catholics had the vote now, though they could not sit in Parliament. Because most Catholics were tenants on large Protestant-owned estates, they had traditionally voted as their landlord told them to vote. But

O'Connell and the Catholic Association encouraged tenants to vote for Catholic candidates who favored emancipation.

- The power of the Catholics was made clear in the election in County Clare in 1828. Clare's MP was a local landowner named William Vesey-Fitzgerald. The Catholic Association decided to put forward O'Connell to oppose him. The turnout was massive, and the association was triumphant, with O'Connell garnering more than 2,000 votes to Fitzgerald's 982.
- By law, a Catholic could not sit in Parliament, but the British government surveyed what had happened in Clare with a sober eye: O'Connell commanded the loyalty of tens of thousands of followers, and although he was publicly committed to nonviolence, it was not at all clear that he could control his supporters.
  - Further, the Irish police force and army had large numbers of Catholics in their ranks; if an organized insurrection should occur, it was possible that these forces would join it rather than putting it down.
  - In short, there was sufficient alarm at the phenomenon of O'Connell to carry the day. In April 1829, Catholic emancipation became a reality.

## **The Repeal Movement**

- O'Connell next threw his authority behind the cause of repealing the Act of Union and restoring political autonomy to Ireland. In 1840, he founded the Repeal Association, aiming at the same sort of popular appeal as the Catholic Association.
- O'Connell also added a new element to his agitation: the monster meeting. He would select a central place for a large population to gather and bring together tens or even hundreds of thousands of people to demonstrate support for the repeal cause. These were peaceful demonstrations, carefully organized to show the discipline and commitment of the participants.

- But repeal would prove to be a far more elusive goal than O'Connell had supposed. During this time, the British Empire was approaching its zenith, with colonial possessions around the world. Enormous wealth poured into England from the Far East, and the colonial administration became almost a nation in itself in its complexity and authority. Parliament was not at all receptive to the idea of granting political autonomy back to one of the colonies.
- Many believed that an independent Ireland would mean the beginning of the end of the British Empire, the “dismemberment” of the imperial body. To repeal the Act of Union in the 1840s, when that empire was nearing its height, was unthinkable.
- In the early 1840s, a group of younger radicals broke away from the repeal movement, frustrated by O'Connell's refusal to countenance more confrontational methods. Called the Young Irelanders, this group advocated armed rebellion, and in 1848, they staged an uprising that failed. Although the Young Irelanders failed in their immediate goals, they decisively influenced Irish history to come.
- As for O'Connell, he died in May 1847, just a few months after he had delivered his last speech to Parliament: an effort to convey the grave events happening in Ireland in what came to be known as the Great Famine.

## **The Great Famine**

- In the late summer of 1845, a new fungus appeared on the potatoes in Ireland, turning hard, healthy potatoes into inedible green mush. There had been many famines in Europe before 1845, but the Great Famine was confined to Ireland, and it lasted for five endless years.
- The early 19<sup>th</sup> century was the beginning of the Industrial Revolution, which started largely in England. The effect on Ireland was a sharp decline in the value of its agricultural goods and a subsequent drop in the value of land. Because of England's unfair



Most conservative estimates put the number of famine deaths at 1 million and the number who left the country during the famine at another million.

protection laws, which made Ireland dependent only on English trade, the common Irishman could not afford to grow alternative crops and, thus, became almost wholly dependent on a single crop, the potato.

- The typical Irish peasant, who existed in a tenant farming system on very small holdings, would pay his annual rent through the sale of his potato crop; he could not pay his rent if the crop failed. In addition, the potato—which had been introduced to Ireland in the late 16th century—had become the dominant food in the typical poor Irishman’s diet.
- In the first year of the famine, reserve stores were eaten, all other crops or food sources were depleted, and any items of value were pawned or sold for food. The assumption was that a man could repay his debts or get back his items the next year, when the crop was successful. But when the second year of blight struck, there were no reserves or resources to fall back on. Families could not be fed, rents could not be paid, and peasants were evicted from their homes.
- Through this process, the landlords gobbled up and consolidated large amounts of land, and the small landowner was nearly eliminated. Indeed, the number of small, family-owned farms was reduced from more than 300,000 to only 88,000—a staggering transformation of the traditional Irish countryside.
- What resources or institutions were available to help the starving poor? The basic assumption was that the landlords should take responsibility for famine relief. A *laissez-faire* economic philosophy ruled, suggesting that direct government intervention in what was essentially seen as a large market correction should be avoided.
- The initial government response to the blight seemed well-intentioned, if woefully inadequate. A commission was formed to study the cause of the crop failure. At first, other foods, such as Indian corn meal, were provided to the populace. A

relief commission was established, and local authorities were encouraged to provide assistance to the poor.

- However, the assistant secretary to the Exchequer, a man named Charles Trevelyan, was in charge of the famine relief project, and Trevelyan was devoted to market-theory economics. According to Trevelyan's dictates, beginning in 1846, the government instituted the Public Works Schemes, whereby food would be distributed to starving Irish only if they worked a full day on a government project.
- The other recourse was the union workhouse, an institution for the destitute established in the 1830s. In the area of Skibbereen, in County Cork, the workhouse housed 277 poor in 1845; by the end of 1846, it housed 890. In 1847, the guardians of the workhouse decided to close it altogether, partially because the workhouse was in debt and partially because its inhabitants were either dying or struggling to make their way to the cities for relief or to the harbors for passage elsewhere.
- Emigration was seen as the only hope left to a starving population. In 1846 and 1847, the peasantry and small farmers who could somehow scrape together a passage left the country in droves. The infamous *coffin ships*—small vessels, not suitable for passengers or lengthy voyages—took on the starving masses for profit. The hold was deliberately overcrowded on these boats, with the knowledge that many would die along the way.
- The effect of the Great Famine on Ireland was devastating. Before the famine, Ireland's population stood at about 8.5 million; by the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it was closer to 4 million. The message to the Catholic peasantry was clear: Remain in Ireland and starve, or leave Ireland and live.
- The patterns of Irish life changed, as well. The peasant cottier system had been destroyed. In its place would arise the Irish family farm: a small but solid holding that was operated by the

family, with a mix of livestock and agriculture and with a cash flow that now came largely from the stock, not the crops.

- But the most lasting effect of the Great Hunger was the bitter, unforgettable hatred of the British government and the system of colonial rule that had reduced the Irish to a starving population. For the growing group of radical nationalists, the famine stood as yet another example of the fate that awaited Ireland if it remained joined to Great Britain.

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## Supplementary Reading

Geoghegan, *King Dan*.

———, *Liberator*.

Poirteir, ed., *The Great Irish Famine*.

Woodham-Smith, *The Great Hunger*.

## Questions to Consider

1. How did Daniel O'Connell shape the course of Irish history? What remarkable attributes did he possess that enabled him to help the Irish attain Catholic emancipation?
2. The Great Famine is the central trauma of Irish history. What were the vital effects of the famine, both within Ireland and in the greater Irish diaspora throughout the world?

# The Celtic Revival

**W**. B. Yeats's 1892 poem "Who Goes with Fergus?" portrays the legendary Celtic chief Fergus, who traded away his right to the Irish high kingship for the wisdom and knowledge of the druid. Fergus abandoned great earthly power in exchange for otherworldly, mystical vision and insight. This lyric evokes what we might call the aura or spirit of Celticism, the spirit that pervaded the late 19<sup>th</sup> century in Irish culture. This was the period of the Celtic Revival, a time of fascination with the ancient past of Ireland.

## Yeats and the Celtic Revival

- In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Irish developed a fascination with an idea of Celticism that was romantic, sentimental, nostalgic, and anti-historical in many ways, yet at the same time, the Celtic Revival was a profoundly political movement, seeking to construct a powerful, original, and ennobling understanding of Irish identity that would allow Ireland to take a proud place among the great nations of the time.
- The enthusiasm for the idea of "the Celt" had been growing in European thought for some time. This partly emanates from romanticism, with its emphasis on nature and the spiritual realm, its rejection of industry and progress, and its ideal of a pure and organic folk culture.
  - This fascination with Celticism found its most vocal proponent in the English essayist Matthew Arnold, who in 1867 published a series of lectures titled *On the Study of*



*Celtic Literature.* Arnold described what became a defining concept of the Celtic temperament: an intimacy with the world of nature and the world of the spirits; a melancholy but also an energetic attitude; a loving and generous if rather simple character; and in Arnold's most famous phrase, a refusal to "bow to the despotism of fact."

In a series of lectures, Matthew Arnold painted a portrait of the Celt that was both admirable and condescending.

- Arnold's portrait of the Celt was both admirable and condescending: If the English or Saxon character was less attractive and vibrant, he was nonetheless more capable of dealing with the world of fact; in other words, the Saxon was equipped to rule an empire, but the Celt was equipped to live happily within it—a troubling concept for Irish identity.
- Arnold's romantic idea of Celticism was influential in Ireland and England in the last third of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Yeats was drawn to the elements of magic and naturalism in Arnold's ideas. But even at the start of his writing career, Yeats sought a more complex and sinewy concept of Celtic character.
- Although the Celtic Revival was backward-looking, seeing meaning in the ancient past, at the same time, there was a sense of growing power and potency, a mood of incipient change. One

of the appeals of going back to some mythic Celticism is that the Celts were pre-Christian, neither Catholic nor Protestant and, hence, offered a hopeful concept of identity that was not linked to the great religious division in Irish culture.

## The Home Rule Movement

- In the decades after the famine, the immediate past had a bitter quality to it. But looking further back, to the heady days of republicanism in the rising of Wolfe Tone and the United Irishmen in 1798, there was a model of nondenominational political independence. This became the principle political force in Ireland around 1890. At this moment, one of the seminal events in Irish political history occurred: the Home Rule movement and the fall of Charles Stewart Parnell. This seismic political event paralleled and even fueled the cultural phenomenon of the Celtic Revival.
- Charles Stewart Parnell was a wealthy Anglo-Irish Protestant landowner from Avondale House in County Wicklow. He rose to prominence in the 1870s as a highly capable young MP, and in 1880, he was named president of the newly formed Irish Home Rule League party. He also was elected president of the newly created Irish National Land League, which sought to enable tenant farmers to purchase the land they worked.
- Parnell favored mass agitation and boycotting over violent confrontation, and he used his newspaper, *United Ireland*, to



Charles Stewart Parnell believed that Ireland could achieve Home Rule only through parliamentary reform.

criticize British land policy. His actions and views were seen as so threatening that the British imprisoned Parnell.

- Shortly after his release from prison in 1882, all of Ireland and England was shocked by the fatal stabbing of the chief secretary for Ireland and his under-secretary. This act was performed by the Invincibles, an extremist republican group that grew out of the Fenian movement of the mid-1800s.
  - Parnell was outraged at this violent act, and he capitalized on the crime to break away from the more radical Land League and the Irish Republican Brotherhood, insisting that the Home Rule movement was Ireland's best chance for independence.
  - He formed an alliance with the British prime minister, William Gladstone, and together, they began planning for an eventual Home Rule bill in Parliament.
- Parnell also developed a partnership with the Catholic Church, realizing that church support for Home Rule was essential. He formed the Irish Parliamentary Party and ensured that the group voted as a bloc. In effect, he held the balance of power between the liberals and the conservatives in Parliament: In the 1885, elections the liberals took 335 seats; the conservatives, 249; and the Irish party, 86. This meant that Parnell's party controlled the swing vote between the two major parties.
- Parnell was now prepared to work tirelessly for a Home Rule bill. His nationalism was in the best tradition of the 1798 United Irishmen movement: constitutional, ecumenical, broad-based, and hoping to include all of Ireland in its concept.
  - In 1886, Gladstone proposed the first Home Rule bill, which in its defeat, split Parliament and caused a new election to be held. During this time, the unionist element in Northern Ireland became alarmed at the progress of Home Rule and formed its

own conservative party, bent on maintaining Ireland's union with Great Britain at all costs.

- Also during this time, agitation over landownership, what came to be called the Land Wars, heightened. Tensions were high in Ireland, and Parnell seemed the only man capable of uniting all the factions.

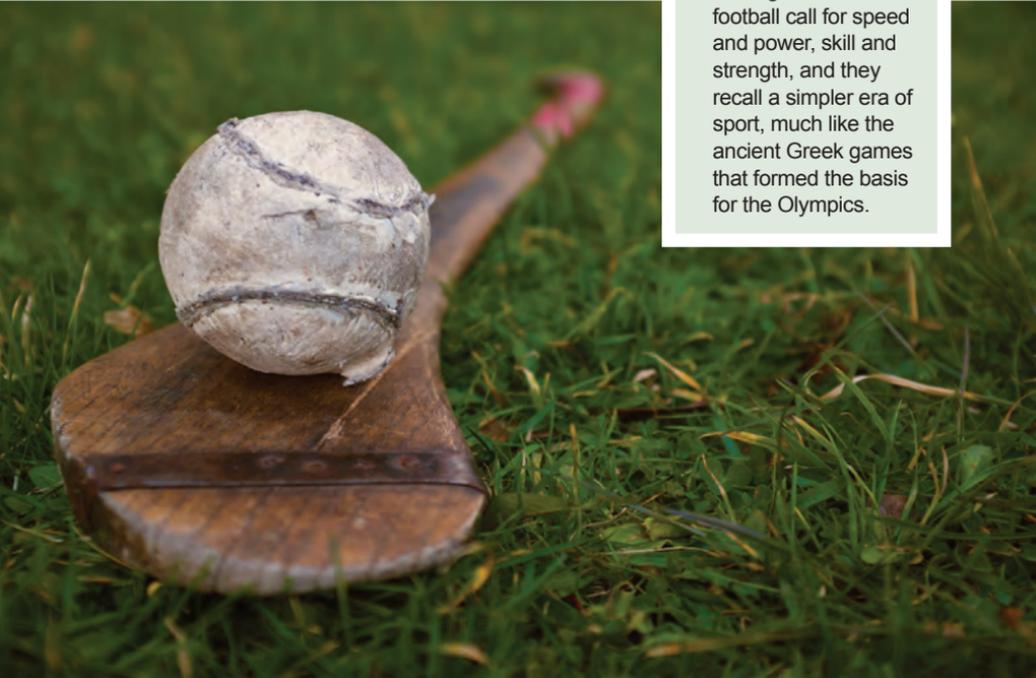
## **Parnell's Downfall**

- Then came Parnell's downfall. In 1889, Captain William O'Shea, who had been a Parnellite supporter, filed for divorce from his wife, Kitty O'Shea. In the suit, he named Parnell as co-respondent, and soon, it became known that Parnell and Mrs. O'Shea had been lovers for some time. The public reaction was catastrophic. Between the rigid morality of Victorian England and the authority of the Catholic Church in Ireland, extramarital affairs and divorce were enormous scandals.
- Parnell, however, was both proud and rather reckless, and he refused to surrender leadership of the Irish party. The party held a meeting in November 1890, at which it split, with nearly two-thirds rejecting Parnell's leadership. He spent the next 10 months relentlessly trying to recoup his political fortunes, all the while battling health problems. In October 1891, he died of pneumonia, with Katherine O'Shea, now his wife, at his side.
- The effect of the Parnell split was resounding in Irish politics, and it would haunt the nation all the way to the far greater split of the Irish Civil War. Some saw the anti-Parnellites as betrayers not just of their leader but also of Ireland's best chance for Home Rule; the anti-Parnellites, in contrast, viewed Parnell and his followers as themselves having betrayed the Home Rule cause.
- All the tensions in Irish society at this time—Protestant and Catholic, unionist and republican, secular and faithful, landowning and land-working—were seething throughout the Parnell saga. The fall of Ireland's "uncrowned king" meant that hope for a parliamentary

route to Home Rule was forsaken for decades. In its place came a renewed interest in armed revolt and, at the same time, a powerful desire to channel that energy into a cultural, spiritual, and intellectual revival of the Irish character and the Irish nation.

## The Celtic Revival in Sports

- The enthusiasm for all things Celtic was pervasive in Ireland at this time. It filled literature and politics, as we've seen, but it spread far beyond these areas. In every walk of life, there was a desire to find a distinctively Irish identity, an identity rooted in the deep Irish past.
- One early example is the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA), which was founded in 1884. The impetus for the GAA came from a man named Michael Cusack, who decided that the young men in his Civil Service Academy needed to learn about traditional Irish sports.
  - Cusack organized a national meeting, at which the Gaelic Athletic Association for the Preservation and Cultivation of National Pastimes was founded.



Hurling and Gaelic football call for speed and power, skill and strength, and they recall a simpler era of sport, much like the ancient Greek games that formed the basis for the Olympics.

- Even within this organization, political divisions were rife. Early on, the GAA split between those who favored armed revolt and support for the newly formed Irish Republican Brotherhood and those who favored parliamentary reform and legislative Home Rule.
- In 1913, the GAA made the bold move of purchasing land on the north side of Dublin and beginning the construction of what would become Croke Park. This park would become the center of traditional Irish sport, and eventually, the British authorities would require permits for Gaelic games to be held there.
- The GAA's most famous involvement in politics occurred on November 21, 1920, which is known to history as Bloody Sunday. On that day, in reprisal for the assassination by Michael Collins's squad of 14 members of the British spy network in Dublin, the British authorities entered Croke Park during a Gaelic football match and opened fire on the crowd, killing 14 innocent spectators.
- The Celtic Revival involved a thorough blend of culture and politics, which cannot be separated. This will be one of the recurring themes in this course. As Ireland struggled toward its political independence—its identity as a nation—it also struggled toward its cultural independence—its identity in art and creativity. Both efforts required a plunge into the past to recover what was most essential in Irish identity. And both required a bold leap forward to constitute the new Irish identity in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The Celtic Revival was the period when this struggle truly began.

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## Supplementary Reading

Lyons, *Charles Stewart Parnell*.

Yeats, *The Celtic Twilight*.

## Questions to Consider

1. What did the Celtic twilight or the Celtic Revival mean to W. B. Yeats? How did his concept of Celtic character differ from that of Matthew Arnold, and what is the significance of this difference?
2. How did the rise and fall of Charles Stewart Parnell fit with the surging interest in matters of Celtic culture? In what ways were these political and cultural narratives intertwined?

# Shaw and Wilde: Irish Wit, London Stage

In the years immediately following the Great Famine, two renowned Irish authors were born in Dublin—Oscar Wilde in 1854 and George Bernard Shaw in 1856. Both were born to Protestant parents—to families on the fringes of the Protestant Ascendancy—and both would move to London. Each would become one of the most successful and celebrated playwrights the English stage had ever known. And both retained an unavoidable, even cultivated, sense of their Irishness, even though neither ever returned to live in Ireland. The story of their successes and their struggles in England is inextricable from their Irish identity.

## Irish Playwrights in England

- By the late 1800s, there was already a long tradition of Irish playwrights in England. Anglo-Irish playwrights began taking a leading part in London theatre life, starting with George Farquhar, a Derry-born playwright and actor who wrote and staged a series of comedies in the early years of the 1700s.
  - Farquhar exploited what would become the convention of the stage Irishman: An Irishman would appear in the play and speak with an exaggerated accent. He would be extraordinarily emotional and endearingly witty but also potentially treacherous; in short, the Irishman could be fun and entertaining but was not to be trusted.
  - Though some English playwrights used this device, the Anglo-Irish writers were particularly prone to portraying the stage

Irishman, perhaps as a defense against their status of being outsiders in England.

- Another Dublin-born writer was Richard Steele, best known for his journalism but also the writer of a number of successful comedies. His best-loved play was his last comedy, *The Conscious Lovers* of 1722.
- The third major figure in this progression of Irish playwrights in London was Oliver Goldsmith. In his drama, Goldsmith showed a mastery of the comic form, ranging from hilarious farce to sentimental romance. He began writing plays in the late 1760s, and in 1773, he produced his masterpiece, *She Stoops to Conquer*.
- We can identify a common set of concerns and trends with these Anglo-Irish playwrights: They offer a study of British mores and manners, and they gently chide or satirize those manners. They offer a hopeful plot of love achieved, yet the very sentimentality of those plots suggests that perhaps they don't quite fully believe in them themselves.
  - These authors also depict versions of the stage Irishman, a figure at once warm, attractive, unreliable, and untamed.
  - Finally, these authors focus on the tensions between the urban center and the provincial countryside—certainly a pressing concern in the England of the approaching Industrial Revolution, yet a concern that was all the more pressing from the Irish perspective. After all, what was Ireland to England but the poor province in relation to the powerful center?
  - Ultimately, the perspective of these playwrights was always somewhat askew to the overall English perspective: They saw the world with Irish eyes and brought this perspective to bear in their representations of British society on the stage.

- This was the tradition of theatre that Wilde and Shaw inherited when they came to London in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Wilde and Shaw also faced the inevitable challenge that every Irish writer must confront: the challenge of language. During the revival, those who wrote in Irish had authenticity as Irish writers, but they also lost virtually any readership beyond a few thousand Irish-literate people in Ireland. Those who wrote in English gained a potentially vast readership but also took up the language of the conqueror and, to that extent, were not true to the Irish identity.
  - Shaw and Wilde each made a point of taking the other seriously, affording each other mutual respect, even though their cultural and personal attitudes were quite different. Each thought that the true religion was art, and each looked on late Victorian society with a satirical eye. By turning their brilliant wit on the drama of sentiment and romance that they inherited, they were able to criticize the prim moralism of Victorian society.
  - Finally, both Shaw and Wilde offered a model of the writer as highly intellectual and exceptionally gifted with language, thereby rejecting the concept of the Irishman as a buffoon.

## George Bernard Shaw

- Shaw came to London in 1876, a brilliant 19-year-old who began writing music criticism. He read everything he could in the British Museum, giving himself an extraordinary, if erratic, education. He was particularly influenced by political writings, especially Marx. Soon, he was involved in the newly formed Labour Party and the Fabian Society, dedicated to transforming England through a revolution of the intellect and culture.



Much like Socrates, George Bernard Shaw viewed himself as a critic of the state for the state's own good.

- In 1892, Shaw completed his first play. The next year, he wrote *Mrs. Warren's Profession*, a daring comedy about organized prostitution. The Lord Chamberlain refused to allow it on the stage, although it uses the prostitution theme to show how all of society is, in fact, selling itself for monetary gain. This would become the Shavian mode: He would hold the mirror up to society, slightly exaggerate its true nature, and force it to look at itself for what it was.
- Shaw achieved great success on the London stage, yet he was keenly aware of his status as an Irishman in England. In his prefaces, Shaw once explained his need to abandon Dublin for London: "As the English language was my weapon, there was nothing for it but London." But Shaw insisted that his English was not quite the same as the English of England; he retained a proud scorn of English culture and pride in his Anglo-Irish heritage.
- In 1904, Yeats invited Shaw to write a play for the new national theatre in Ireland, the Abbey Theatre. Shaw responded with *John Bull's Other Island*, a sparkling play that satirizes both how the English view Ireland and how the Irish view themselves. Ironically, Yeats rejected the play, saying it was too long. The play premiered, even more ironically, in London, at the Royal Court Theatre in 1904.
- Shaw's love-hate relationship with Ireland continued throughout his life. In 1909, he allowed the Abbey Theatre to produce his comedy *The Shewing-Up of Blanco Posnet*, a play that the censor had banned in England because of its supposedly blasphemous references to God. Shaw saw the play as another step in his "persistent struggle to force the public to reconsider its morals."

## Oscar Wilde

- The whole concept of public morality was crucial in the life and work of Oscar Wilde. Wilde came from a more established family than did Shaw; he attended Trinity College and Oxford University, where he was a superb student. By the early 1880s, he was already known as an essayist, a lecturer, and a skilled speaker.

- Wilde's work was associated with the late-19<sup>th</sup>-century movements known as aestheticism and decadence. Aestheticism emphasized art for the sake of art alone; it denied any ethical or utilitarian purpose to art. Decadence pushed this position even further: The decadents felt that art was superior to life and that life at its best attains to the quality of art. Wilde himself was a champion of art as the fullest realization of human existence.
- In 1891, Wilde published his only novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.
  - In this eerie tale, a beautiful young man sells his soul in order not to age; instead, a portrait of himself, hidden in his upstairs chambers, ages for him. Dorian lives a life of hedonistic, destructive pleasure, all the while remaining youthful and beautiful, but his portrait records every sin he commits.
  - By the novel's end, Dorian takes his own life; his corpse is then transformed into an old, withered, ugly man, and his portrait is restored to its original youthful beauty and innocence.
  - It's a fascinating novel, filled with questions about what makes a life meaningful, what constitutes moral responsibility, and what duties we owe to our fellow creatures.
- Wilde's art rejects conventional notions of meaning and morality, and at the same time, he plumbs the depths of the question of human value. This was the approach he took when, in 1891, he began writing his first successful play, the social comedy *Lady Windermere's Fan*. The plot focuses on social striving and on the rules of fashionable society. What makes the play sparkle is its impressive wit and its presentation of the Wildean dandy, the gentleman to whom fashion and style are far more important than morality, truth, or meaning.
- Wilde followed this successful play with *A Woman of No Importance* and *An Ideal Husband*. At the same time, he wrote a very different play, *Salome*. Highly symbolic, erotic, and suggestive of

Oscar Wilde's fourth play, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, is his most flawless comedy; a brilliant play of wit, pun, and satire, *Earnest* marked Wilde's height of prestige in the London theatrical world.



meanings that are difficult to discern, the play scandalized many readers. But this was glossed over by the success of Wilde's fourth play, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, produced in 1895.

- *The Importance of Being Earnest* is often noted for its wit and social satire. But other elements are at play in this work that are characteristic of all of Wilde's writing.

- In the two male characters, John Worthing and Algernon Moncrieff, each of whom claims to be named something he is not and each of whom has a second identity, we see Wilde's fascination with two-ness. Double identities, a dark other side, a hidden life—all connect with Wilde's own life as a homosexual.
- Furthermore, the play's interest in the ability of one male to corrupt another, as if the darker side could claim the more socially approved side, similarly seems to spring from Wilde's own life and preoccupations.
- As Wilde was at the height of his theatrical success, his personal life was plunging into ruin. Wilde's principal love relationship was with Lord Alfred Douglas, a handsome young man 16 years Wilde's junior. Unfortunately, Douglas's father was the marquess of Queensberry, who was convinced that Wilde was corrupting and degrading his son.
  - Queensberry accused Wilde of sodomy, which at the time was a crime in England. Wilde responded with a suit of libel against Queensberry. But Queensberry had hired private detectives to follow Wilde and collect evidence against him.
  - Wilde dropped his libel suit, but the sodomy accusation brought him to trial, and he was convicted and sentenced to two years hard labor in Reading Gaol. When he was released in 1897, he was penniless and disgraced.
- Wilde moved to France where friends helped support him. He never wrote another play, but he did write poetry, including "The Ballad of Reading Gaol," about his atrocious prison experiences. In the closing stanzas of this work, he expressed the anguish of not just his own suffering but, ultimately, the suffering of all humanity—all those who destroy the thing they most love.

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## Supplementary Reading

Shaw, *George Bernard Shaw's Plays*.

Wilde, *The Plays of Oscar Wilde*.

## Questions to Consider

1. How did the careers of Shaw and Wilde parallel each other? What common challenges did they face as Irishmen in London, and how did each respond to these challenges?
2. Shaw's and Wilde's careers ended in very different ways. How can we understand these different trajectories? How did the Irishness of these authors affect the ways in which English audiences responded to their lives?

# W. B. Yeats and the Irish Renaissance

In 1888, a book appeared in Ireland titled *Poems and Ballads of Young Ireland*. This collection of poems and songs had emerged from a circle of young writers who associated with a man named John O'Leary, a one-time member of the Fenians who had been sentenced to 20 years of hard labor for his revolutionary activity. After years of exile, O'Leary returned to Ireland in 1885. One of the main contributors to *Poems and Ballads of Young Ireland* was W. B. Yeats. The poem and the book offer a fitting tribute to O'Leary's influence and mark a new direction in the Irish imagination. Many scholars have stated that with this book, the Irish Literary Revival began.

## Background on Yeats

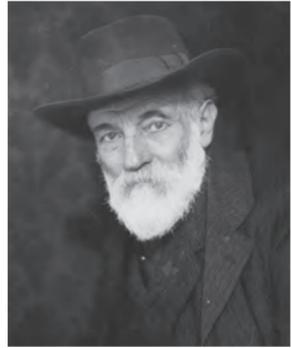
- W. B. Yeats was born into the Anglo-Irish Protestant class, though not the aristocratic, landowning ascendancy. His father, John Butler Yeats, was descended from Church of Ireland clergy and Trinity College graduates.
- John Butler Yeats seemed destined to carry on the family's rise in the world: He graduated from Trinity, was called to the bar in Dublin, and in 1863, married Susan



For W. B. Yeats, the Celtic imagination offered a treasure trove of symbols, characters, stories, settings, and themes drawn from ancient Irish myth and legend.

Pollexfen, daughter of a well-to-do merchant trader. Two years later, in 1865, their first child, the future poet, was born.

- Soon after their marriage, John Butler announced that he was giving up the profession of law to become a painter. This surely came as somewhat of a shock to his young wife, who had anticipated a comfortable middle-class life as the wife of a lawyer and landowner, not the bohemian existence of an itinerant artist.
- John Butler enrolled as an art student in London and uprooted the family to England. His only income came from what little remained of the properties he had inherited, and soon, these were gone. Friends arranged commissions for him, but although he became a talented portraitist, very little money came in from his art. Throughout the 1870s and 1880s, the Yeats family lived a challenging life.
- Eventually, there would be four children: William; Susan, known as Lily; Elizabeth, known as Lollie; and the youngest son, Jack, who would become the greatest painter in Irish history. In addition to moving his children around England, John Butler would often leave them in Sligo with their mother's family for months at a time. This itinerant and rootless existence was traumatic for the children.
- As for John Butler's wife, Susan, life was almost unbearable. She never took to England or to her husband's bohemian lifestyle and always longed to be back in Ireland among her own family. She probably suffered severe depression and, in the 1880s, had



John Butler Yeats was clearly a remarkable man—full of energy, brilliance, wit, and charm—and he was a determined champion of art, yet he was also irresponsible, mercurial, and selfish.

a series of strokes that left her essentially incapacitated. For the young Yeats, his dominant experiences of his mother were of a distant woman, yet he inherited much of her imagination and her powerful affection for the Sligo countryside of her youth.

- The time the children spent in Sligo was often idyllic and wonderful. They would walk the hills, glens, and lakes, taking in a beautiful world of nature and the preindustrial, timeless land that offered such a contrast to the industrialized Victorian London to which their father had taken them. Here, Susan would spend hours with the country folk as they told stories and folktales about the fairies, the banshee, and the heroes of legend. This was the root of Yeats's love for the Irish imagination and his fascination with folklore.

## Early Poetry

- These were the formative influences on the emerging poet: two worlds, the Irish countryside and the London city; two parents, a brilliant but eccentric father and a distant but imaginative mother; two intellectual influences, the rational skepticism of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and the Irish folk culture of the timeless past. In the early 1880s, the Yeats family returned to Ireland and settled in Dublin; there, Yeats began to make the acquaintances of the key figures with whom he would forge the Celtic Revival and Irish Cultural Renaissance.
- The two worlds that Yeats inherited from his parents would dominate his early poetry. He expressed this tension in one of his most famous poems, "The Lake Isle of Innisfree," which he began in 1888 and finished in 1890. Though one of his earliest poems, it remains one of his best-known and most beloved. Its opening lines express a desire to depart from wherever the poet is to a place of comfort and sustenance, a place that could be home.
  - This is a poem of the exile, who longs to return to the home of his childhood—or to childhood itself, with its innocence, wonder, and magic. In the middle part of the poem, Yeats

## The Lake Isle of Innisfree

by W. B. Yeats

I will arise and go now, and go to Innisfree,  
    And a small cabin build there, of clay and wattles made;  
Nine bean-rows will I have there, a hive for the honey-bee,  
    And live alone in the bee-loud glade.

And I shall have some peace there, for peace comes dropping slow,  
    Dropping from the veils of the morning to where the cricket sings;  
There midnight's all a glimmer, and noon a purple glow,  
    And evening full of the linnet's wings.

I will arise and go now for always night and day  
    I hear lake water lapping with low sounds by the shore;  
While I stand on the roadway, or on the pavement gray,  
    I hear it in the deep heart's core.

imagines this wonderful environment, clearly evoking an almost Edenic place.

- Interestingly, the poem does not end with the speaker actually returning to the Lake Isle of Innisfree. But why would he stay in the place of exile? Because in a sense, although the lake isle is a real place, the world that the poet remembers exists only in his imagination. That is where the ideal place is, where peace and satisfaction are to be found, and where any true home will be. This truly is a poem of exile—not exile from a physical home but from a true home that could satisfy the poet's desires.
- This sense of exile, of forever wandering without a true home in this life, pervades all of Yeats's poetry. And, indeed, it became one of the defining elements of modernism itself.

- Another of Yeats's earliest poems, "The Stolen Child," published in 1886, shows how powerfully Yeats engaged in the traditional Irish world.
  - The stolen child motif comes out of Irish fairy lore, in which the legend of the changeling is prominent. According to this legend, the fairies steal a healthy human child and leave in its place a sickly fairy child.
  - What's interesting about Yeats's version is that he does not even hint at the sickly replacement for the human child; rather, Yeats imagines the call by the fairies to "come away." As the poem goes on, the fairy host describes its night-long dances on the shore, its starlight wanderings, and how it whispers in mortal ears. This is surely the allure of the other world for Yeats, who was already longing to be called away to the supernatural, spiritual realm.
  - At the same time, there is a hint of wistfulness, even of warning, at the poem's end, as the fairy choir suggests what the child will have to give up if he evanesces into the fairy world. The end of the poem is an expression of real regret, a regret that was also keenly felt by Yeats himself as he contemplated abandoning the human realm for the realm of magic and enchantment. It's as if Yeats is warning himself against his own inclination to forsake the human world for the world of dreams.

### **Other Voices in the Celtic Revival**

- By the late 1880s, Yeats was already emerging as the leading voice in the Celtic Revival, which itself would be the first step to the larger and more expansive Irish Renaissance. But he certainly was not alone in this growing movement. A series of fascinating, gifted, and dynamic writers and intellectuals were also active with Yeats during this time.

- One of the most compelling of these figures was George Russell, who went by the pen name AE, which he derived from the word *aeon*, meaning life force, vitality, the principle of generation. Russell, like Yeats, was a mystic, a believer in other worlds, visions, and theosophy. He was a good poet, but he was also a practical man, a journalist and editor for many years who commented on every aspect of Irish culture throughout the first three decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.
  - Starting in 1897, Russell became assistant secretary to the Irish Agricultural Organisation Society, a group created to support Irish agriculture as a cooperative venture. It was nationalist- and Home Rule-oriented and played a role in the economic development of Ireland. In 1905, Russell became editor of the *Irish Homestead*, the newspaper of the organization. Under his leadership, the *Homestead* became a leading organ of cultural opinion and literature.
  - Throughout the teens and twenties, Russell sought to bring the voices and views of the larger world into Ireland. He published international news and opinion and tried to help Ireland see itself as part of the larger European world. He rejected the sentimental Gaelic heritage view of Irish identity, insisting that Irish identity was always mixed.
  - Russell wanted to see Ireland emerge into the 20<sup>th</sup> century as a cosmopolitan and cultured nation and resisted the polarizing identities of Catholic versus Protestant, Gaelic versus English, ancient versus modern. Like Yeats, he was shaped by, and himself helped to shape, the Celtic Revival.
- Another figure who played a critical role in the early phases of the Irish Renaissance was Douglas Hyde. Hyde is best known for his work on behalf of the Irish language.
  - Hyde became active in the Society for the Preservation of the Irish Language in the early 1880s and wrote poetry in Irish

under his pen name, An Craoibhín Aoibhinn, “the pleasant little branch.” In 1892, he delivered his famous address, “The Necessity for De-Anglicizing Ireland.” Here, Hyde argued that for Ireland to flourish, it must stop turning to England for its culture and, instead, cultivate its own native language, poetry, art, and imagination.

- This speech was the keynote of the Irish Revival. The next year, Hyde founded the Gaelic League. This organization was dedicated to the preservation and propagation of the Irish language and, by extension, Irish culture and traditional arts. The Gaelic League established schools for Irish, sponsored plays and pageants in Irish, and encouraged writing and poetry in Irish. Although Hyde insisted that the league should be above politics, it became associated with nationalism.
- In sowing the seeds of the renaissance of Irish culture, Hyde, Russell, and Yeats were joined by another figure, the poet and novelist Katharine Tynan, a good friend of Yeats and a prolific author whose career spanned many decades. She was an important poet even before Yeats, having published two volumes of poems in the 1880s and more than a dozen books in the 1890s.
- These major figures all came on the scene in Ireland in the 1880s, the crucial period when the political efforts at establishing Home Rule faltered. The time seemed ripe for the cultural revivalists to breathe new life into Ireland and establish a new Irish identity. The revivalists looked backward to Ireland’s ancient past and hoped to draw on this past, even to invoke it as if by magic spell, in order to breathe new life into Ireland’s present and future.

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## Supplementary Reading

Foster, W. B. *Yeats, A Life*, vol. I: *The Apprentice Mage*.

Yeats, *The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats*.

## Questions to Consider

1. How did Yeats's parents shape the intellect, imagination, and character of their poet-son? In what ways did their different landscapes—Sligo, Dublin, London—also affect his thought and work?
2. The Celtic Revival movement brought a wide range of figures together. What would you say were their common interests? How can we account for so many figures sharing such a passion for Ireland's past and present?

## Yeats in the 1890s

In 1889, W. B. Yeats published *The Wanderings of Oisín and Other Poems*, a collection of his early lyric poems that had occupied him during the mid-1880s. The central poem, which gives the collection its name, is a 50-page epic based on the great Irish legend of Oisín. This is an interesting choice for a young Irish poet to make near the end of the 19th century. Oisín was the legendary son of Fionn MacCumhaill, the great chief of the Fianna, the warriors of Finn. The stories of the Fianna form one of the central threads of Celtic mythology, the very mythology that was beginning to capture the imagination of Yeats and his contemporaries at this time.

### The Quest of Yeats

- The Oisín story has many of the elements that were already consuming Yeats's imagination and, indeed, the imaginations of many Irish as the Celtic Revival gained speed. Oisín is a quest figure; he desires precisely what Yeats himself so passionately desires: the land of enchantment, the transcendent world of the spirits where neither age nor death can claim one. Yet Oisín is also dissatisfied with the fairy world and determines to return to his earthly home.
- This is exactly the ambivalent situation of Yeats. At nearly this time, he wrote "To the Rose upon the Rood of Time," a 24-line poem with a two-part structure.
  - In the first part, he asks the Rose—which for Yeats stands for immortal beauty, the transcendent, the unchanging world

of art and vision—to transport him so that he can “sing the ancient ways.”

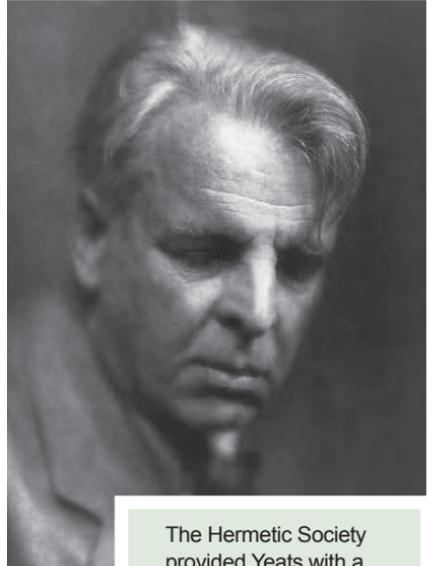
- Yet as Yeats nears the rapturous experience of losing himself, perhaps forever, in this otherworldly realm, he suddenly retreats: “come near, come near, come near—Ah, leave me still / A little space for the rose-breath to fill!” He pulls back, then lists all the mundane, ordinary things he is loath to leave behind: the field mouse, the grass, the “heavy mortal hopes” that define a person’s life.
- This is the characteristic Yeatsian impulse: drawn toward the otherworldly and the transcendent vision and, at the same time, reluctant to immerse himself in that vision and always longing also for the things of this world.

## Yeats and Theosophy

- Like his hero Oisín, Yeats is drawn toward the realm of enchantment yet also immersed in the world of “heavy mortal hopes.” Yeats’s fascination with the occult is a fine example of this dual impulse in his thinking.
- Yeats’s father was a materialist and a rationalist; he rejected the Anglican faith and urged his rational worldview on his son. But Yeats found himself drawn irresistibly to the occult, and in the 1890s, in both London and Dublin, he found many like-minded people who shared this fascination.
- In the late 1880s, he joined a group called the Hermetic Society, which was heavily influenced by one of the most interesting characters of the age, Madame Blavatsky. The author of several key texts of the occult, Blavatsky was a leading exponent of a set of doctrines known as *theosophy*.
  - Theosophical writers emphasized the mystical aspects of human experience and embraced such ideas as reincarnation, meditation, spiritual progress toward nirvana, and magic. In

the process, they blended every Eastern religion and mystical tradition they could find, from Buddhism to Gnosticism to transcendentalism to Jewish Kabbalistic thought.

- To many creative intellectuals in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, theosophy was a welcome relief from the dominant trends of the century. The esoteric, spiritual rituals and teachings of Madame Blavatsky and others were like a breath of fresh air, expanding the idea of human existence right when that existence seemed most constricted.
- This mystical, spiritual questing was the mode out of which Yeats wrote his poetry of the 1890s, culminating in the 1895 publication of his book *Poems*.
  - In this collection, we find the expression of Yeats's idea that poetry is itself a kind of magic. Just as the ancient conception of magic involved speaking words in a certain order and rhythm—the casting of spells—so, too, for Yeats, poetry was far more than assembling lovely or meaningful words.



The Hermetic Society provided Yeats with a cohort of like-minded, imaginative, questing individuals, all seeking to find a world of meaning and potency that would lift them out of the disappointments and despair of this world.

- He aimed in his poetry to create a religious experience and to find a passage to the spiritual world that he felt was always shimmering somewhere just beyond the reach of our senses.
- In an essay titled “Magic,” Yeats expressed his central belief in the powers of the other world: “The borders of our mind are ever shifting, and many minds can flow into one another and create or reveal a single mind, a single energy .... This great mind and great memory can be evoked by symbols.” Thus, the proper symbols can connect us to this unifying memory and mind—and these symbols are poetry itself.
- We see this idea repeatedly in Yeats’s work from the 1890s. For example, in the 1895 poem “The Man Who Dreamed of Faeryland,” Yeats imagines a man who goes through many walks of life, thinking of “money cares and fears,” the worldly things. Yet at times, he hears a voice calling to him from a mystical world. The man wanders through life until his death, but even then, life does not end: The final line, “the man has found no comfort in the grave,” suggests that the surrounding spirit world lives on after the merely mortal life has ended.

## **Yeats and the Irish Oral Tradition**

- Yeats not only wrote mystical, spiritual poetry in the 1890s, but he also composed ballads that clearly emerged from the Irish oral tradition. In such poems as “The Ballad of Father Gilligan” and “The Ballad of Moll Magee,” we see Yeats trying to connect to the Irish peasant song and story tradition. This would always prove difficult for Yeats: He struggled to find the authentic voices, speech patterns, cadences, and colloquialisms of the Irish peasantry.
- In one of his more beloved poems, “The Fiddler of Dooney,” written in 1899, Yeats probably came as close as he would ever come to achieving a true Irish folk ballad, blending rhythm, language, humor, religion, and rhyme in a fine poetic expression.

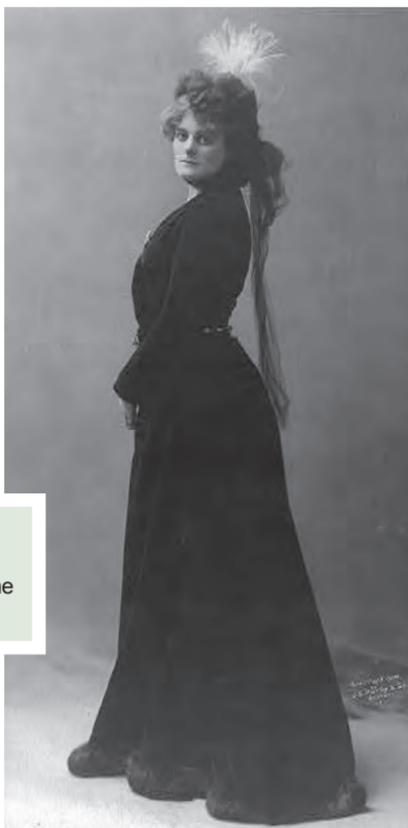
- Yeats aimed at the same authentic voice of the people and storytellers in his volume of short stories, tales, and legends titled *The Celtic Twilight*. This is a collection of the folklore and fairytales that Yeats had heard in the Sligo countryside, much embellished by Yeats's own imagination and perspective. We find here tales of miraculous creatures, enchanted woods, ghosts and sorcerers, and of course, fairy legends. Yeats shows his fascination with folklore, not for its own sake but, rather, for the potential avenues it offers to the visionary realm of the fairies, the world of magic, and ancient wisdom.

## Maud Gonne

- In January of 1889, at his English home, Yeats greeted a new visitor, a beautiful 22-year-old woman named Maud Gonne, whose commitment to Irish nationalism had been fired by reading *The Wanderings of Oisín*. Yeats would later describe that meeting as a fated visitation meant only for great artists and poets.

Yeats's love for Maud Gonne was absolute and unchanging; she figures in his poetry from the 1890s to the end of his life.

- To Yeats, Gonne represented not just a beautiful earthly woman but the ideal he had been



### **“The Consolation”**

by W. B. Yeats

I had this thought awhile ago,  
“My darling cannot understand  
What I have done, or what would do  
In this blind bitter land.”

And I grew weary of the sun  
Until my thoughts cleared up again,  
Remembering that the best I have done  
Was done to make it plain;

That every year I have cried, “At length  
My darling understands it all,  
Because I have come into my strength,  
And words obey my call.”

That had she done so who can say  
What would have shaken from the sieve?  
I might have thrown poor words away  
And been content to live.

striving toward in his poetry, in his own life of romantic fantasy, and especially in his efforts to reach the transcendent ideals that lie beyond the always unsatisfying, transitory earthly realities.

- Yeats asked Gonne to marry him numerous times, and after her final rejection in 1917, he asked her 22-year-old daughter, Iseult, to marry him instead, as if possession of the daughter would bring him close to possession of her mother. When he instead married Georgiana Hyde-Lees later that year, she understood that she would always be a second choice for Yeats.

- Gonne would figure in Yeats's poetry from the early 1890s all the way to his final poems of the late 1930s, a 40-year poetic obsession. They almost certainly became lovers for a time, probably in 1908 or so. In 1903, when Gonne suddenly married Major John MacBride, Yeats was devastated. He had to come to terms with the realization that Gonne preferred the man of action and deeds to himself, the man of words, imagination, and passive adoration.
- Even though her marriage to MacBride eventually failed, Gonne herself seemed to always realize that a marriage to Yeats would be disastrous for them both. She held him in great esteem and had powerful affection for him, but she knew their temperaments were quite different, and their political views were a strong divide.
- To Yeats, the most obvious comparison to Gonne was Helen of Troy, who brought the civilized world to ruin because of her extraordinary beauty. In "No Second Troy," he says of Gonne, "what could she have done being what she is? / Was there another Troy for her to burn?" We see in such poems Yeats's resentment and agony that this beautiful Helen would not return his adoration, as well as his resigned recognition that such an immortal and enchanting beauty ought not to love him but must be what she is: a woman beyond his reach.

## **The Decade of the 1890s**

- In the 1890s, Yeats embraced a wide range of spiritual and metaphysical movements, from theosophy and séances to folklore collecting and magic. He also sought to express an authentic Irish poetic voice, working to master the Irish vernacular, the symbols of the Irish landscape, and the rhythms of Irish speech. And he fell deeply in love with a woman who, though unattained, would be a poetic muse for life.
- Toward the end of this decade, Yeats met two people who would profoundly alter his future life and the cultural directions of Ireland itself: Lady Gregory, widow of the Anglo-Irish master of Coole

Park, and John Millington Synge, the Trinity-educated musician and scholar. The two would come to form, with Yeats, the heart and soul of the Irish Renaissance movement.

- In the 1890s, Yeats emerged as the most significant cultural figure in Ireland. He came into his strength as a master poet. He was the leading figure in a spiritual quest to find greater meaning than the merely material world could offer. He entered into one of the most famous idealized love relationships in literary history. And, especially, he determined to become not just a great poet but a great Irish poet—precisely what he would be for the next 40 years.

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## Supplementary Reading

Brown, *The Life of W. B. Yeats*.

Yeats, *Yeats's Poetry, Drama, and Prose*.

## Questions to Consider

1. How would you describe Yeats's attitudes toward the world of fairy lore, mythology, and spiritualism? In what ways did these attitudes shape Yeats's poetry during the 1890s?
2. Yeats's love for Maud Gonne is one of the great romances in literary history. How did his desire for her get channeled into his poetry? Would you say that her refusals of him helped him to become a great poet?

# Lady Gregory: The Woman behind the Revival

Lady Gregory is one of the most remarkable women of letters of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Her range of achievements, her central role in helping to shape Yeats's creativity, and her own remarkable work in a wide array of writings mark her as one of the most important figures in Irish literary history and, indeed, as a central shaper of what we have come to understand as the Irish identity.

## The Young Augusta Persse

- Lady Gregory was born in 1852 as Isabella Augusta Persse into a landowning, Protestant Ascendancy family at Roxborough in South Galway. She grew up as a rather neglected child in a busy household that was dedicated to the father, his sons, and male pursuits.
- Isabella was largely self-educated, but she was drawn at an early age to the stories and legends told by her Catholic nurse, Mary Sheridan. Mary left a lasting impression of the power of the folk imagination, and in fact, Lady Gregory would eventually record a number of her tales in folklore collections.
- Isabella read widely and had an eager mind, leading her to delve into the volumes of English poets that she found in the family library. But her education came in other forms, as well: She was particularly drawn to the Fenian pamphlets and the poems of the Young Irelanders that she bought at the local news agent.

- Eventually, Isabella took on a caretaker role for her family, and she seemed destined, by her early 20s, for a life as a spinster nurse to her brothers.
- This all changed when she was 27 years old, and Sir William Gregory asked her to marry him. He was 60 years old, a widower, a man of culture and wide experience. He had been an MP, had served in the wider imperial administration, and had been knighted for his contributions to the empire.
  - His estate of Coole Park offered a different vision of life than Isabella's home: Coole was cultivated, dedicated not to hunting and drinking but to books, literature, and culture. Isabella, upon visiting Coole, was enchanted by its excellent library, its ordered life, and the magnificent woods that surrounded the house.
  - She and Sir William began exchanging letters and books, comparing the novels of Henry James and their experiences of Europe. Soon, marriage seemed desirable to them both.

## **Marriage to William Gregory**

- For Isabella—now Lady Augusta Gregory—coming to Coole Park meant coming to a world in which she could grow and thrive. Soon, she and William were spending months in England and on the Continent. She traveled with William to Paris, Rome, Athens, and Constantinople and became friends with other cultured ladies.
- For Augusta, marriage was a liberation, freeing her physically and mentally from the constraints of her former life. At the end of their second year of marriage, they had a son, Robert Gregory. As was standard for Victorian ladies, Augusta gave the daily rearing of the newborn over to a wet nurse, and she and Sir William were soon traveling the Continent again. She described later in her life the “constant pain” of leaving Robert behind, yet she reveled in the expansion of her horizons that her married life afforded her.

- Sir William died in 1892, leaving Lady Gregory a widow at the age of 40. She would wear black the rest of her life as a sign of respect and affection toward her husband. And yet, we now know that Lady Gregory had engaged in a love affair in 1882, the second year of her marriage.
  - She and William had traveled to Egypt, where a political crisis was brewing between a growing Arab nationalist movement and the British and French colonial administration. Lady Gregory was drawn toward the nationalist cause.
  - She met Wilfrid Scawen Blunt, a handsome, Byronic man who was heavily embroiled in the political situation. Blunt's sexual magnetism was powerful, and Lady Gregory felt herself drawn to the heady combination of political commitment, poetic energy, and sexual excitement. Their affair lasted for several months, into 1883, when they decided to end it.
  - Only when Blunt's papers were opened to the public in 1972 did scholars discover the affair. Upon their parting, Lady Gregory had given him a packet of 12 sonnets she had written about the love affair. Blunt had published these in one of his own books in 1892, revised by him and without attribution to Gregory. But the original poems are essential for understanding Gregory; they show her passionate, expressive, and sexually adventurous nature, which is hard to glimpse in her public image as the grande dame of Irish literature.
  - The poems reveal Gregory's attitude toward the affair and its conclusion; she did not regret the affair, though she suffered greatly from guilt. Clearly, she had to express the full power of the emotions she experienced, and she thought of writing as the form through which she could project her experience and her imagination.

## Lady Gregory's Political Life

- If Lady Gregory felt conflicted in her personal life, the same was true of her public or political life. The world of the Irish landowner class was radically changing right at the time she came to Coole Park. During the years of her courtship and marriage, tenant/landlord relations in Ireland had deteriorated into a battle. As prices for crops fell, tenants could not pay their rents and landlords resorted to the old practice of evictions, but now, fired by the nationalist Home Rule sentiments infusing the land, the tenants began to organize and resist.



Lady Gregory was an independent woman with a deep commitment to finding the essence of Irish identity.

- In the fall of 1879, Charles Stewart Parnell and Michael Davitt formed the Land League, dedicated to the rights of the peasantry and tenant farmers. The government had passed a series of land reform acts but had not achieved a large-scale rent reduction or addressed tenant rights. As a result, Parnell and Davitt encouraged a strike by tenant farmers. The striking renters were subject to eviction, and any tenants who did pay the rent were boycotted by their fellow tenants. A rash of agrarian violence broke out.
- From 1879 to 1882, the Land War raged, with regular evictions, strikes, boycotts, and destruction of property. Davitt's aims were more radical than Parnell's: Davitt wanted land ownership

nationalized entirely; Parnell envisioned tenant farmers ultimately becoming freeholders. Eventually the Land League formed the foundation for Parnell's Home Rule movement, and by the early 1900s, nearly three-quarters of Irish tenants were buying out the estates of their former landlords.

- This was the social upheaval that Lady Gregory and Sir William faced when they established their new family at Coole in 1881. Sir William lamented the decline of the old landlord-tenant relationship, but Augusta was far more sympathetic to the tenant cause. It was evident to her that her own leanings toward the Irish people would require her to turn away from the class and people of her birth.

### **Lady Gregory's Literary Life**

- By the time Sir William died in 1892, Augusta had become an accomplished woman. She was keenly interested in politics, was on intimate terms with a range of leading social figures, and had talked with literary titans of the day. She also wrote poetry and short fiction. But she was most fascinated by the Irish countryside and the Irish folk, particularly their myths, folklore, and vibrant vernacular language.
- She began to travel to the cottages on the Coole estate, and eventually beyond, to talk with the inhabitants, absorb their stories, and even learn their language. In 1893, she visited the Aran Islands, where life remained nearly medieval in its simplicity and closeness to tradition, and the Irish language was virtually the only one spoken.
- For Gregory, Irish folklore was not a doorway into the mystical, as it was for Yeats. Gregory's interest was in folklore for its own sake; she was more like a modern-day anthropologist, investigating and comparing these artifacts of the ancient world to better understand the people and places from which they emerged.

- Gregory produced a number of books that brought her research in folklore to the reading public, including *Poets and Dreamers*, *A Book of Saints and Wonders*, and her magnum opus of folklore, *Visions and Beliefs in the West of Ireland*.

## Lady Gregory and Yeats

- Yeats and Gregory first met in 1894 in London, but their actual collaboration began in July of 1896, when Augusta was visiting a Galway neighbor and was joined by Yeats and his companions.
  - It was a perfect meeting of the minds: Yeats was a budding poetic genius, fascinated by the folklore, symbolism, and culture of the Irish peasantry, but he had little real knowledge of the peasants. Gregory was developing a true intimacy with the farmers, cottagers, and tenants throughout the west of Ireland.
  - On learning of Yeats's interest in folklore, she invited him to join her on her travels throughout Galway and Clare, where they would spend the day listening to local lore. In the evenings, Gregory would write out the stories they had heard. This material would form the basis of her books on Irish folklore, but for Yeats, it would form the raw material for his poetry.
- Starting in 1897, Yeats spent the next 19 summers at Coole Park with Lady Gregory. In many ways, she became his aristocratic patron, providing him with a place to work and the means to live in an ease he could not otherwise afford. Gregory recognized Yeats's genius, and she wanted to encourage and cultivate that genius both for himself and for Ireland.
- But Gregory was no mere passive patron to Yeats. She resolutely pursued her own writing and followed her own ideas of Irish culture and identity. Soon, she would turn to writing plays, as she, Yeats, and Synge took up the great project of the Irish national theatre, one of the defining undertakings of the revival.

- When Yeats was asked to assemble a compilation of ancient Irish myths, he declined the job; Lady Gregory, however, took up the project with ambition. She examined ancient manuscripts in the British Museum; consulted 19<sup>th</sup>-century translations made by British and German philologists; and determined to rework the texts into an accessible, readable version written in the English that was closest to the Irish spoken in Ireland for centuries.
    - In this endeavor, Lady Gregory returned Irish mythology to its true folk sources, rendering the myths as the people in that actual time might have told and understood them. She produced two great volumes: *Cuchulain of Muirthemne* in 1902 and *Gods and Fighting Men* in 1904.
    - In providing these myths for all to read, Gregory made a signal contribution to the Irish Revival, restoring the Irish past at a time when the Irish present was searching for its own definition and meaning.
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## Supplementary Reading

Gregory, *Selected Writings*.

Hill, *Lady Gregory*.

## Questions to Consider

1. What was the impact of her marriage on Lady Gregory's life and thought? What new opportunities and new complexities did marriage bring to Gregory?
2. Describe the elements that led Lady Gregory to take up writing. What determined the sort of writer she would be? How did her relationship with Yeats affect her creative work?

# J. M. Synge and the Aran Islands

On the far west coast of Ireland, there lies the Burren, a stretch of limestone rock that looks like a lunar landscape. It runs over the hills to the sea; then, five miles out into the ocean, the rock surfaces in the Aran Islands: Inishmore, Inishmaan, and Inisheer. The islands have layers of history: ruined monasteries, primitive churches, Celtic stone forts, Bronze Age tombs, and a prehistoric fort. John Millington Synge first came to the Aran Islands in 1898 and returned each summer for the next five years. From those experiences, he wrote *The Aran Islands*, one of the most significant and influential books to emerge from the Irish Renaissance.

### Background on John Millington Synge

- John Synge was born in 1871 just south of Dublin, into an Anglo-Irish Protestant family. His father died the year after he was born, an event that marked Synge forever. As for his mother, she was devoutly religious. He was schooled privately because he was always in ill health, and this, too, affected his life. He eventually attended Trinity College and took his degree in 1892, specializing in languages and music.
- After college, Synge left Ireland for Germany to pursue musical studies. But because he was nervous about performing, he abandoned a musical career to study medieval French literature in Paris. There, in December 1896, he met Yeats.
- This meeting has taken on the status of legend. Yeats had already read some of Synge's early poetry and was not impressed with its moody, brooding quality. He felt that Synge was writing out of

that exhausted, despairing, materialistic 19<sup>th</sup>-century mode—not the passionate, expressive Irish romanticism that Yeats favored. Thus, he advised Synge to abandon the modern world and go to the Aran Islands in the far west of their native land.

- In 1898, Synge went to Aran for the first time and encountered the land- and seascape, the life and culture of the people, their customs and character, and the remarkable Irish language, which fired his imagination, rescued him from the tired poetry of Europe, and showed him the poetic possibilities in Ireland.
- The book that most directly recounts Synge's experiences in the far west of Ireland is entitled simply *The Aran Islands*. It opens on the main island of Inishmore, which Synge refers to as Aranmor.
  - As the book opens, Synge is in Aran but not of Aran, feeling alienated from the world he has entered. The book chronicles his gradual movement from the outside to the inside of Aran life, as he learns the language and becomes accepted by the people.
  - Yet Synge still has an oscillating relationship with Aran. At one moment, he seems to have achieved a kinship with the people. At other moments, he despairs of ever understanding the natives' lives.

## The Allure of the Islands

- Synge's effort to understand the mode of life on Aran reflects the quintessential impulse of many Irish artists of his day. The allure of the western island became, during this time, the incarnation of what was taken to be the most traditional, authentic expression possible of the Irish character and spirit. Indeed, the metaphor of the western island became the ideal of the Celtic Revival.
- The ideal of cultural unity became even more appealing as the 1900s progressed and Ireland became separated into North and

The Aran Islands are covered in stone—stone walls, stone fields, stone churches, stone cottages—more than 1,000 miles of stone walls on the three islands, making a mosaic on the landscape.



South, Catholic and Protestant, nationalist and unionist. The western island provided a kind of fantasy of essential Irish-ness.

- Ultimately, the west came to be seen as a Garden of Eden, a prelapsarian place of innocence and purity—a contrast not just with corrupt modern Ireland but with the entire direction of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century world, in which mechanization, warfare, and division seemed to be the rule. *The Aran Islands* partakes of the idea of the west as the source of life, the lost mother, the true self. Indeed, the book became one of the signature works in defining the potent metaphor of the western island.

## Synge and the Aran Islands

- What did Synge seek in coming to Aran? We must always keep in mind that he desired to be an artist, seeking to express himself



and life as he understood it. On Aran, he saw a kinship between human life and the life of nature, as well as a purity and simplicity that offered an escape from the modern world of alienation and loneliness.

- Consequently, Synge constantly sought vision and insight, yet the book is filled with images and metaphors of blindness, mists and fogs that creep over the islands and prevent clear vision. But when the mist passes, whether literal fog or a more metaphorical blindness, Synge describes with rapture the clarity of sight and vision he has attained. The oscillation between blindness and insight seems definitive of his experience on the islands. Synge wanted to find the heart of the mystery of the islanders' life, which he equated with the life of the artist—what he sought for himself.

- Another oscillating pattern in the book is Synge's effort to attain a unity or understanding with the islanders, followed by his frustration at his inability to truly understand them or have them accept him into their tribe. At one point he writes, "On some days I feel this island as a perfect home and resting place; on other days I feel that I am a waif among the people."
- At another moment in the narrative, Synge has rowed across from Inishmore, the largest island, to Inishmaan, the smaller middle island, which is even more primitive. The middle islanders strike Synge as "moved by strange archaic sympathies with the world"; we can understand these "archaic sympathies" as another version of what Synge desires: an almost primeval oneness with creation.
- It is no accident that Synge's attraction to the Islanders and their way of life so often turns on the Irish language. The language became the doorway for Synge into the life of the islanders, the almost gnostic pathway to a clear vision of what this archaic oneness with creation might consist in.
- Synge was also fascinated with the islanders' attitudes toward superstition. Certainly, a good deal of fairy lore and folklore is discussed in the book, but *The Aran Islands* is noticeably thin on the sort of nostalgic evocation of fairytales that we see in much of the Celtic Revival. It seems for Synge that the islanders have an expanded range of belief; the world is filled with more possibility for them than it is for him, and this partly accounts for his oscillating experiences of rapturous joy in their presence and despondent gloom in their absence.
- Part of the book's poignancy is the fact that Synge knows throughout each journey that he must leave. This also explains the rush of emotion he experiences each time he returns to Aran and enters again, for a time, the embrace of its people and culture.
- In addition to noting their attitudes toward the supernatural, Synge was attentive to the islanders' attitudes toward death. *The Aran*

*Islands* is obsessed with dying and death. Some of this certainly is Synge's own temperament: His plays are similarly filled with a concern with death, and he knew that he was dying of Hodgkin's disease by the time the book was published in 1907. That awareness of approaching mortality colors much of this book.

- For example, Synge was fascinated by the islanders' use of the traditional Irish keen or the wail of the women at a funeral. In the first part of the book, he attends the funeral of an old woman on the island and is intrigued by "the inarticulate chant" that the women produce.
- For Synge, this became a ritual of more than anthropological interest; he saw his own condition—indeed, the condition of isolated, alienated humanity—in this cry of outrage and grief. Synge wrote, "They are usually silent, but in the presence of death all outward show of indifference or patience is forgotten, and they shriek with pitiable despair before the horror of the fate to which they all are doomed."
- Although this perfectly captures the plight of the islanders before an apparently indifferent universe, we also see here Synge himself, feeling the isolation of Western man at the dawn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It is another of the many ways in which Synge both longs for the primitive quality of the islanders and expresses the anxiety of the contemporary modernist.
- As mentioned, these oscillating or dual perspectives dominate the book; another example is its fundamental pattern of arrival and departure. Throughout the book, Synge continues to arrive and depart, not just to and from the Aran Islands: He moves in and out of different cottages and in and out of different characters' lives.
- It's as if Synge is at pains to depict the wandering, homeless life that will become a typical feature of his comedies, in which characters have no settled abode. It certainly echoes Synge's own restless life.

- Indeed, the psychological condition of homelessness is definitive of modernity itself, characterized by exile, alienation, and a loss of the old sense of home.
- Another oscillating pattern in *The Aran Islands* is the coming and going of the tides. This is a version of the ongoing rhythm of desolation and sustenance—and on Aran, these are caused by the same force, the sea.
- The sea provides the islanders with their livelihood and their food, but it also claims them through drowning, storm, and shipwreck.
- Similarly, there is a tension throughout the book between that which is permanent and that which is in flux. Ironically, the sea is both the permanent force in the islanders' lives and the most fluctuating, moving with the tides, changeable as the storms.
- Ultimately, Synge always knows that his time on Aran is fleeting, that this is but a temporary station in his complex and trying sojourn through the modern world.
  - Synge can sense the approach of death, and he finds on Aran not the idyllic western island that many of the revivalists hoped for but, rather, a place where life can be lived to the fullest, even if only for a brief time.
  - This is the keynote of the book. In those moments of solemn revelation—when he feels a oneness with the islanders, with the sea that surrounds them, with their traditional and simple way of life, and even with the God who both comforts and overwhelms them—Synge gives poetic utterance to the importance of seizing existence before it passes forever. This, of course, is the mindset of the artist, who tries to capture those fleeting, transcendent moments of meaning before they are gone.

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## Supplementary Reading

McCormack, *Fool of the Family*.

Synge, *The Aran Islands*.

## Questions to Consider

1. What drew Synge to the Aran Islands? How did his relationship to the islands and the islanders change over the course of his visits to Aran?
2. How did the ideal of the western island function in the period of the Celtic Revival? Was Synge part of this movement, or is his depiction of the Aran Islands at odds with it?

# James Joyce: Emerging Genius of Dublin

**A**lthough there are many important figures in the Irish Revival, the two titans are W. B. Yeats and James Joyce. Yet Joyce did not see himself as part of the Irish Revival movement. In fact, many scholars don't even view Joyce as a specifically Irish writer; he is often placed among the great figures of European modernism, that movement of literature and art that ran from about World War I to the outbreak of World War II. Other scholars believe that although Joyce is a defining figure in European modernism, he is also a quintessentially Irish writer, and in fact, we cannot fully understand him without understanding this aspect of his work.

### Joyce's Early Life

- Joyce was born in the affluent suburbs outside Dublin in 1882. His father belonged to the rising Catholic middle class, and when Joyce was young, his parents lived a comfortable upper-middle-class life, complete with a fine house and servants. They were wealthy enough to send James off to one of the best Catholic boarding schools in the country.
- When the family's financial situation declined, he enrolled at another school, where the young Joyce distinguished himself as a top student, winning national prizes for his essays and achieving particular note for his gift with languages. Both schools he attended were Jesuit academies, and Joyce received a superb education.
- Joyce's Catholicism was absolutely essential to his mind and makeup. From an early age, he was drawn to the details and complexities of Catholic faith and theology. Like his character

Stephen Dedalus, Joyce considered a vocation to the priesthood when he was young. But the servitude he felt the church demanded of him was impossible for Joyce; he was constitutionally unable to submit to any sort of external rule. For Joyce, the prime value was freedom, including freedom of his own spiritual conscience.

- Joyce turned away from Catholicism and, instead, embraced the vocation of the artist and the worship of art. In this, he established the paradigmatic stance of all modernist artists: In place of God and the religion they could no longer believe in, the modernists substituted art as their sacred object, and the life of the artist replaced the life of the priest as the pathway to the divine. Yet this does not mean that Joyce was an atheist or an unbeliever; he maintained a fascination with the spiritual world.
- Though Joyce was born into relative affluence, his father's fortunes quickly declined. John Joyce was drawn toward drink, and his fortunes rested largely on political favor, which disappeared with the fall of Parnell and the change in political fortunes in Ireland. By the time Joyce was 20, the family (now grown to 10 children) was living in a two-room cottage, and his mother was dying of cancer. His father, an unemployed drunkard, was incapable of providing for the home and children.
- In 1898, Joyce committed himself to the life of the intellectual and the artist. He enrolled in University College Dublin, which had been established to serve the growing population of Catholics who were entering professional life. There, he read widely in European philosophy and literature and became part of the great current of European thought that would come to be labeled *modernism*.

## Modernism

- Modernism emerged in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century as a counter to the general optimism and sense of progress that defined much of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The 19<sup>th</sup> century, with its growth in industry and science, its achievements in medicine and humanistic studies,



World War I used all the new technologies that the Industrial Revolution and scientific progress had made possible, including the machine gun, the tank, aerial bombardment, biological weapons, and long-distance artillery.

and its relative peace, seemed to augur an end to war and the continuous improvement of the human condition.

- But the First World War gave the lie to the myth of human progress. In the horrors of the trenches, it became impossible to believe that humanity was improving, that we were getting closer to living the way God intended. Quite the contrary, the war revealed to many that humanity was becoming more devilish with each new invention. Modernity looked into the abyss of human experience.
- Modernity also emerged in the wake of the great questioners of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century: Karl Marx, Friedrich Nietzsche, Charles

Darwin, and Sigmund Freud. These radical thinkers were breaking the boundaries of their own time, and with the dawning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the full implications of their thought began to be understood.



## Joyce and Nora Barnacle

- In August 1904, Joyce published his first story. Also that year, he finished what would become his first book, a collection of poems titled *Chamber Music* that he would publish in 1907.

But most important of all, in 1904, he met and fell in love with a woman from the west of Ireland named Nora Barnacle.

Freud and other early-20th-century thinkers, including Marx, Nietzsche, and Darwin, cast into radical doubt the sense of human privilege and, indeed, the very meaning of being human.

- For the next 35 years, Joyce and Nora lived in Europe, yet in every book he produced, Joyce wrote only about Ireland. His book of poems, *Chamber Music*, is set in the Dublin of his youth; his second book, *Dubliners*, is about the world of Dublin at the turn of the century; his third book, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, is an autobiographical novel that mirrors Joyce's own childhood and young adulthood; his fourth book, *Ulysses*, sets the story of Homer's *Odyssey* in the Dublin of 1904; and his final book, *Finnegans Wake*, tells the story of a Dublin pub keeper and his family.
- Joyce initially went to Paris in the winter of 1902 and 1903, but he returned to Dublin in the spring of 1903 because his mother was dying of cancer. He then found himself living in his father's house with his siblings, in real poverty, with no clear future before him. In June 1904, he met Nora.

- They were, perhaps, an unlikely couple: Joyce, hyper-educated, driven, ambitious, guilt-ridden, conscious of his extraordinary talent and anxious to show his country how great a writer he was, and Nora, not well educated though certainly intelligent and, in many ways, even more perceptive and insightful than Joyce.
- Joyce, seeking direction and feeling the loss of his mother, found in Nora the ideal female companion. She would become his muse, lover, mother, friend, and confidante, and she would inspire the incredible array of female characters throughout his fiction.
- Joyce and Nora left Ireland and settled in Trieste. There, Joyce finished *Dubliners*, wrote *Portrait*, and began *Ulysses*, while he and Nora had two children and lived a complex and challenging life together.

## **Dubliners**

- Joyce began his writing career as a poet, but he knew that he could never rival Yeats. He needed the more expansive form of fiction, partly because he longed for a larger, fuller canvas on which to paint his thoughts and partly because poetry was too personal an expression; Joyce wanted the veils and protection of authorial distance and ironic prose.
- In the summer of 1904, he published a short story titled “The Sisters.” This would eventually become the opening story in *Dubliners*, published in 1914. Joyce actually finished the stories in 1907, but they were deemed by potential publishers as bordering on the indecent. Joyce’s anatomy of the real nature of modern life was seen as too real to be printed, and he labored for seven years to bring his book out in its true form, always refusing to revise what he saw as his faithful rendering of Dublin life.
- Paralysis—moral, spiritual, sexual, physical—forms the theme of the stories, evident in every character and plot. Joyce saw this as the condition of modern humanity in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century

but having a special potency in Dublin, defined as it was by the oppression of British rule, centuries of famine and poverty, and what Joyce saw as the repressive morality of the Catholic Church.

- The early stories were quite brief, but soon, they began to grow, as each became a more substantial portrait of Dublin. Joyce himself also grew as a writer through the creation of the stories. He was learning how to write great fiction, story by story; experimenting with different voices and points of view; learning how to combine symbolism and realism; and mastering an increasingly large canvas.
- The stories in *Dubliners* not only stand alone as superb works of short fiction, but they also relate carefully and intimately to one another, building on each story's insights and ideas to form a richly realized portrait of turn-of-the-century Dublin. Although no character is repeated, cumulatively, the stories work together, and we realize that the main character of the book is Dublin itself.
- The first three stories deal with the world of childhood: "The Sisters" is told from the perspective of a young boy, puzzling over the strange death of an elderly priest. "An Encounter" is also told by a young boy; he and a friend skip school one day to roam the city and encounter a strange man, who exposes himself. "Araby" is told by yet another boy, experiencing his first love and finding his illusions of romance crushed by the dingy, desperate city around him.
- *Dubliners* then moves on to four stories of young adulthood. These stories all have in common a focus on young people and their struggles to come of age in Dublin, facing untrustworthy lovers, corrupting friends, and manipulative adults. The four stories that follow deal with the lives of adults trying to eke out a living in the poverty of Dublin.
- The final stories focus on public life in Dublin: the world of local politics, now evacuated of meaning and morality with the fall of Parnell; the musical world and its petty yet ruthless competitions; and the world of religion, reduced to a merely commercial

accounting of one's sins and virtues. In the final story, "The Dead," Joyce revisits all the other stories, writing a masterpiece that revises and, in many ways, reconsiders the entire book he has just written.

- The stories all hinge on a moment of revelation, of suddenly seeing or comprehending something to which one had previously been blind. Often, these revelations are negative; a character sees that vanity, not nobility, motivates his actions, or another realizes that his apparent friends have victimized and betrayed him. Joyce called these moments of realization *epiphanies*, a term that derives both from Greek drama and the Christian tradition.
- The other term Joyce used for his technique was *epicleti*, which is the moment in the Eastern Orthodox mass when the priest invokes the Holy Spirit to transform the wafer and wine into the divine substance of the body and blood of Christ.
- This was the genius of James Joyce: He balanced the ordinary and the mystical, the mundane and the spiritual, the natural and the symbolic. If the priests of his boyhood could transform ordinary bread into the body of God, Joyce sought to transform ordinary life into the stuff of divinity.

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## Supplementary Reading

Ellmann, *James Joyce*.

Joyce, *Dubliners*.

## Questions to Consider

1. How was Joyce's life unique among the major figures of the Irish Renaissance? What key factors in that life drove Joyce to the sort of writing he created?
2. *Dubliners* emerged out of both the larger cultural matrix of European modernism and the more specific context of the Irish Renaissance. In what ways did Joyce combine these elements in his short fiction?

## Joyce's *Dubliners*: Anatomy of a City

As we saw in the last lecture, the central character of *Dubliners* is the city of Dublin itself. The stories were initially seen as exemplars of the style known as *naturalism*, which was similar to traditional realistic fiction taken to an extreme. But recall that Joyce felt his writing bore a parallel to the transubstantiation of the Christian mass, in which the mundane wafer and wine are transformed into the transcendent, divine substance of God. The parallel is clear: In writing so carefully about the ordinary, mundane world of lower-class Dublin, Joyce also strives to bring into relief the luminous, meaning-filled, transcendent nature of that world.

### “Araby”

- The story “Araby” is the third and final childhood story in *Dubliners*. From its brief opening paragraph, Joyce’s style of blending realism and symbolism can be glimpsed:

North Richmond Street, being blind, was a quiet street except at the hour when the Christian Brothers’ School set the boys free. An uninhabited house of two storeys stood at the blind end, detached from its neighbours in a square ground. The other houses of the street, conscious of decent lives within them, gazed at one another with brown imperturbable faces.

- The realism here is complete. North Richmond Street is an actual street in Dublin, and the Christian Brothers’ schools had been founded in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century as a means for the rising Catholic class to gain a basic education.



In his work, Joyce captured exactly the street names, the stores and shops, the schedule of the trams and trains, even the amount of time it would take a character to walk from one point in the city to another.

- The street is “blind,” meaning that it’s a dead-end street but also suggesting an inability to see, a blindness in the inhabitants of the street itself, which is a key element in this story’s meaning. Joyce also lingers on the fact of the “uninhabited house,” suggesting a kind of vacancy or emptiness within these dwellings—another key idea in the tale.
- The narrator of the story is a boy on the cusp of adolescence. He undergoes his first experience of love in the story—in his adoration of the older sister of a friend—but he has not yet entered the world of sexuality.
- A traveling carnival or bazaar, called Araby, comes to Dublin. The girl mentions to the narrator that she wishes she could go to Araby, but she cannot. The boy says shyly, “If I go, I will bring you

something.” And this becomes his great romantic quest: to get to the bazaar and find a suitable gift for his lady-love.

- When the boy finally gets to the bazaar, it is late in the evening, and most of the stalls are closed. He ultimately realizes not only that nothing there can fulfill his quest, but worse, that the quest itself is a mere adolescent fantasy. The thought that he could possibly find anything in this crude material world to match his hopes is an illusion. The story ends with the boy weeping and condemning himself for his vanity. He determines that he himself is somehow to blame for the woefully inadequate world around him.
- This is the pattern of all of the stories in *Dubliners*. Joyce provides ample evidence of the cause of the Dubliners’ paralysis: Their lives are nearly hopeless, and their desires are impossible to sustain because of the oppression that prevails in Ireland—the oppression of Britain and the church.

### “Ivy Day in the Committee Room”

- The most overtly political story in *Dubliners* is “Ivy Day in the Committee Room.” The title refers to Ivy Day, a commemoration of the death of Parnell that takes place in Ireland every year on October 6. The story recalls Parnell in its title as an ironic contrast to the actual subject matter: It is set on the day of a municipal election in Dublin, a rather petty affair to choose someone to supervise city upkeep and maintenance.
- In the story, a group of men gathers in a dim room, all canvassing for a candidate in the election. So despondent are they about his chances and about the significance of the election that they prefer to gather in this room than work for his success. As the story proceeds, they complain that the candidate has not paid them.
- Eventually, a boy brings some bottles of stout, apparently the closest thing to payment the men will receive, yet they are delighted. This serves as an ironic commentary on how far Irish politics has fallen in the decade or so since Parnell’s downfall. In

place of Parnell's heroic independence and remarkable abilities, we now have a despondent political scene in which beer, not leadership, are accounted most.

- Joyce intensifies the comparison of past to present by turning the dialogue toward the controversial invitation to bring Britain's King Edward VII to the country on a goodwill tour. Edward was well-known as a womanizer, and the men discuss how hypocritical it would be to invite him to Ireland when so many had turned on Parnell for his affair with Katharine O'Shea. But when the comparison is made to Parnell, one of them interrupts and says flatly, "Parnell is dead." Indeed, the ghost of Parnell hovers throughout this story, as a marker of Irish guilt at their leader's betrayal.
- At the story's conclusion, one of the men recites a poem he has written about Parnell's death. Though sentimental and mawkish, it catches the sense of heroism that surrounded Parnell and his comparison to the high kings of old. As the recitation ends, the men hide their emotions of shame and sorrow.

### **"The Dead"**

- "The Dead" is a family story, which sets it apart from the bulk of the *Dubliners* collection, in which families are usually divided, absent, or incomplete. Its central characters are Gretta and Gabriel Conroy, contentedly married, with two children. The story is set on the night of the annual Christmas dinner held by Gabriel's two aunts.
- The story's opening is a contrast to all the other stories in the collection. Joyce describes a celebration that is joyous and loving. To come to this, after reading the previous pages about the dreariness, isolation, and paralysis of the Dubliners, is a welcome contrast.
- The characters offer an equally stark contrast. Gabriel and Gretta are a loving couple. They are affectionate to each other, devoted to their two sons and to Gabriel's aunts, and relatively well off. Yet it is also evident that something is missing from their lives.

- We learn that although Gabriel seems universally well-liked, he is filled with self-doubt.
  - He frets about the speech he is expected to give at the table, and he is particularly distressed when another guest, Miss Ivors, an ardent nationalist, accuses Gabriel of being in sympathy with English culture.
  - When she urges him to travel westward and get to know his own country, he bursts out, “O, to tell you the truth, I’m sick of my own country, sick of it!”
  - Later, Gretta expresses delight at the prospect of a visit to the west, but Gabriel dismisses her. It seems that Gabriel feels alienated from Ireland, particularly the rural, traditional west, the home of his wife.
- As the party ends, Gabriel sees Gretta standing on the stairs, listening to a singer on the floor above. Gretta is clearly affected by the folksong, and Gabriel is affected by her expression: “Gabriel saw that there was colour on her cheeks and that her eyes were shining. A sudden tide of joy went leaping out of his heart.”
- On the ride back to their hotel, Gabriel anticipates that they will renew their love that night in a passionate embrace. But instead, Gretta is cold and distant, clearly distracted.
  - At last, in their hotel room, he asks her what’s wrong. She replies, “O, I am thinking about that song” and bursts into tears.
  - Gabriel asks why the song should so affect her. And she tells him that she is thinking about a young man, Michael Furey, who used to sing it. She says: “Such eyes as he had: big dark eyes! And such an expression in them—an expression!”
  - Coming at the end of the *Dubliners* tales, with all their paralysis and isolation, the figure of Michael Furey, like a

ghost conjured from Gretta's past, is remarkable. He stands for youth, love, and "expression"—the power that all the characters throughout *Dubliners* long for and cannot attain.

- Gabriel is stirred to jealousy, thinking that Gretta wanted to return to Galway to see this lover from her past. But she tells him that Michael Furey died at age 17. When Gabriel asks what he died of, she responds, "I think he died for me."
  - This confession of the depth of Michael Furey's love terrifies Gabriel, because he realizes how poor and pitiful his own love must seem in comparison. Gretta tells him how, the night before she was to leave for the convent, Michael came to her window, standing in the garden in the freezing rain.
  - She implored him to go home before his illness grew worse, but he told her that he did not want to live. Within a week, she received news that he was dead.
- The story closes with Gabriel reflecting on what Gretta has told him. He thinks of the poor part he has played in her life compared to Michael Furey and of the inevitability of death. Yet the thought does not cause Gabriel to despair. Instead, "generous tears filled Gabriel's eyes" as he realizes that such a feeling as Michael Furey possessed must be love. "Better pass boldly into that other world," he muses, "in the full glory of some passion, than fade and wither dismally with age."
- As he watches the snow fall outside the window, Gabriel determines to follow that spirit of fury into the west. Joyce writes: "The time had come for him to set out on his journey westward." Scholars debate what that line implies: Has Gabriel realized that in the west of Ireland there is a passion, an expression, that he should try to find before it's too late? Or does it mean that he, too, is going on his death journey, into the west, the place of the setting sun?

- The final lines of the story suggest that, in contrast to the preceding stories of division and isolation, this story—and, hence, the book itself—ends in the unity not just of Ireland but indeed of all things: “Snow was general all over Ireland. It was falling on every part of the dark central plain, on the treeless hills, falling softly upon the Bog of Allen and, farther westward, softly falling into the dark mutinous Shannon waves. . . . His soul swooned slowly as he heard the snow falling faintly through the universe and faintly falling, like the descent of their last end, upon all the living and the dead.”
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## Supplementary Reading

Gifford, *Joyce Annotated*.

Joyce, *Dubliners: Text and Criticism*.

## Questions to Consider

1. How do the *Dubliners* stories combine both realistic naturalism and symbolism to achieve their effects?
2. Paralysis is the great, overarching theme of the *Dubliners* stories. How do we see this theme at work in “Araby” and “Ivy Day,” and do we see it overcome in any way in the final story, “The Dead”?

# The Abbey Theatre

In the summer of 1897, in the Duras House on the southern shore of Galway Bay, a remarkable meeting took place. Lady Gregory came to visit the owner of the home, a wealthy and rather eccentric count named Florimond de Basterot. There, she found two other guests: Edward Martyn, one of the rare Catholic landowners in the area, and W. B. Yeats, whom Gregory had first met two years before. This meeting addressed one topic of particular consequence: the need for an Irish national theatre. The result of this conversation would be the founding of one of the most important theatres in Europe and one of the defining elements in modern Irish identity: the Abbey Theatre.

### Goals of the Abbey Theatre

- Lady Gregory and Yeats had an ambitious double aim for the project of an Irish theatre: to bring to Ireland a uniquely indigenous canon of plays and to provide Ireland with a noble, inspiring, artistically rigorous tradition of theatre to replace the largely sentimental and farcical plays that had heretofore dominated the Irish stage.
- In their manifesto for the theatre, Gregory and Yeats wrote that they sought a noble theatre that would reveal the “ancient idealism” of Ireland in place of the “buffoonery” that had typified dramatic representations of the Irish previously.
  - Here, Yeats and Gregory were referring to the tradition of the stage Irishman that had frequented London theatres since the



The original concept of the Irish theatre movement was to stage plays in both English and Irish in order to restore and regenerate ancient Irish culture and language.

late 17<sup>th</sup> century and that continued in the sentimental and comic productions that were then current in Dublin.

- Instead, Yeats and Gregory sought a visionary theatre, an artistic and cultural space that would express itself in a distinctively Irish voice and would, therefore, parallel the emergence of Ireland as an independent political entity. The fate of Ireland as a nation and the fate of the Irish national theatre from the beginning went hand in hand.

## Early Performances

- Yeats and Gregory formed the Irish Literary Theatre company, and its first performance took place in 1899. The bill featured Edward Martyn's *The Heather Field* and Yeats's *The Countess Cathleen*, which he had written in 1892 but had not yet been performed.

- Yeats's play created controversy, because it tells the story of a Protestant countess who sells her soul to the devil to save her Irish Catholic tenants from famine.
- The negative depiction of Catholicism was objectionable to the audience, and the tension of having a largely Protestant and upper-class coterie directing the work of the supposedly national theatre was present from the very beginning.
- The first production was staged by London actors, which became another source of tension. The Irish actor Willie Fay and his brother Frank would eventually conclude that an Irish national theatre had to be performed by Irish actors if it were to capture and express the Irish character.
- The Fay brothers met with Yeats, and in 1902, they produced *Cathleen ni Houlihan* in Dublin, with Maud Gonne playing the title role. The performance was highly successful, and the play was received with enthusiasm by the nationalistic audience.
  - *Cathleen ni Houlihan* is set in the northwest countryside of Ireland in 1798, on the eve of the United Irishmen rebellion. It tells the story of a young man, Michael, who is about to make a fine marriage to a local girl, but the day the dowry is confirmed, an old woman comes to their cottage and lures Michael away to join her in the rebellion.
  - This one-act play is striking for its balance of traditional comedy—Michael's mother and father badgering each other about how old they've gotten and so forth—and poetic drama in a high style that the Dublin stage had not seen before.
  - The very name Cathleen ni Houlihan, literally "Cathleen, the daughter of Houlihan," is an ancient image of Ireland herself; just like the *shan van vocht*, or "poor old woman," each is emblematic of Ireland's sufferings.

- *Cathleen ni Houlihan* was received with extraordinary enthusiasm, striking the audience as a genuine expression of heroic self-sacrifice and love of country. It made Yeats a true celebrity and gave him credibility as a nationalist poet once again. He publicly took sole credit for the play, and only years later was it revealed that Lady Gregory had actually written nearly all of the play, with Yeats providing only the enchanting speech of the old woman.

## Opening of the Abbey Theatre

- Strengthened by the success of this play and the growth in national prestige, Lady Gregory and her colleagues moved to become a more self-consciously Irish enterprise. Working with the Fay brothers and other native Irish actors, they sought a Dublin location for their theatre.
- Supported by the wealth of a sympathetic Englishwoman, Miss Annie Horniman, they bought and renovated the old Mechanics' Theatre, turning it into a 562-seat playhouse decorated by leading Irish artists and craftsmen, such as Sarah Purser and John Butler Yeats.
- On December 27, 1904, the Abbey Theatre opened for its first production. The plays were Yeats's *On Baile's Strand*, *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, and J. M. Synge's one-act comedy, *In the Shadow of the Glen*. Although the plays attributed to Yeats were received with enthusiasm, Synge's comedy was frowned upon, because it seemed to cast aspersions on the Irish home and character.
- The acting style that Frank and Willie Fay encouraged was what came to be known as the *Abbey style*. It aimed at an artlessness, a restrained realism and lifelike acting that brought dignity to the performance. The stage and stage properties were intentionally simplified, so that the focus was on what the actors were saying. This proved ideal for the dramas of Synge and Gregory, but it was less conducive to Yeats's vision. Yeats was less interested in realistic life and more interested in heightened expressions, visions, symbols, and a poetic theatre.

- Yeats's *On Baile's Strand* fit perfectly with the impulses of the Celtic Revival, and *Cathleen ni Houlihan* powerfully touched the Irish nationalists. Indeed, later in life, Yeats wondered if the play was, in fact, responsible for the blood sacrifice of the Easter Rising of 1916.

## Other Irish Playwrights

- Yeats, Gregory, and Synge were not the only Irish playwrights by any means. In the early years of the Irish Literary Theatre, Douglas Hyde, cofounder of the Gaelic League and future president of Ireland, wrote a play in the Irish language called *Casadh an tSugain* ("The Twisting of the Rope"). The play was the first in the Irish language to be produced on a modern, professional stage, and the performance struck a chord with many people.
- Another key playwright of this early period was Padraic Colum, who wrote three plays produced by the Irish Theatre: *Broken Soil* (later revised as *The Fiddler's House*), *The Land*, and *Thomas Muskerry*. These plays are gritty, realistic depictions of the hard conditions of Irish life.

## A Maturing Theatre

- Despite some popular successes, the Abbey struggled in the early years to fill the theatre. Because all the actors were committed to their day jobs, performances were sporadic. There was a need to professionalize the company and to generate more income by touring England and America.
- Further, the basically democratic nature of the society, with every participant having an equal vote, led to artistic decisions that, in Yeats's view, were not in the best interests of the theatre. Thus, in 1906, Yeats engineered a restructuring through which control of the theatre would be vested in a board of directors, consisting of Yeats, Synge, and Gregory.
- In response to this change, many of the actors left the company. The Fay brothers stayed on for a time, but by 1908, they, too, had

resigned. With their departure, the Abbey shifted from being an actors' theatre to being a playwrights' theatre, and it ceased to be a democratic organization and became an artistic enterprise guided by its visionary and dedicated leadership.

- The relationship with Miss Horniman did not last. She grew increasingly dissatisfied with the nationalist politics that were impossible to keep out of the company. When Edward VII died in 1910, the Abbey did not cancel its performances that night (a result of miscommunication). When the directors refused to issue an apology, Horniman withdrew her subsidy supporting the theatre.
- During this same period, the third director of the Abbey, J. M. Synge, wrote his greatest works, which tested the Abbey as much as any other event in its history. Before succumbing to cancer, he saw his greatest play performed on the Abbey stage. Indeed, in 1907, Synge's comic masterpiece, *The Playboy of the Western World*, provoked the riots that proved to be the Abbey's coming-of-age experience and showed the theatre's commitment to artistic principles even in opposition to the will of the people.
- Gregory's selfless labor on behalf of the theatre was without question the spirit that sustained it throughout these challenges. As Yeats's interest in theatre waned, Gregory continued to support the playhouse, fighting all the battles, from English censorship, to company squabbles, to the complexities of international tours.
- In 1924, two years after the Irish Free State had been established, Yeats and Gregory made a formal offer of the Abbey to the state, and in 1925, the government voted an annual subsidy for the theatre. With this move, it seemed to many as if the mission of the Celtic Revival had been fulfilled: The leaders of art and the leaders of the state coincided, as Ireland gained its freedom politically and its national theatre became a key element in the new nation's identity.
- Ironically, or perhaps fittingly, this same era would see another round of controversy that nearly equaled the furor over Synge's

*Playboy*. A remarkable new playwright, Sean O'Casey, emerged, and his trilogy of plays dealing with the Easter Rising, the War of Independence, and the Irish Civil War caused great controversy. O'Casey gave a bitterly realistic, unsentimental account of Irish political life, and to a nation just recovering from the horror of warfare and sacrifice, his vision was not welcome.

- From modest beginnings, the Abbey Theatre became truly the national stage for Ireland, and it continues to thrive today. It has now produced roughly 1,000 plays since its founding more than a century ago. And it has fulfilled the idealistic purpose with which its founders endowed it.

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## Supplementary Reading

Fitz-Simon, *The Abbey Theatre*.

Gregory, *Our Irish Theatre*.

## Questions to Consider

1. What elements led Gregory, Yeats, and others to create a national theater for Ireland? How did this impulse fit into the overarching story of the Irish Renaissance?
2. How is *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, the collaborative effort of both Yeats and Gregory, representative of the creative work of the Abbey—both in its strengths and in its problematic dimensions?

# Lady Gregory as the People's Playwright

In her one-act play *The Rising of the Moon*, Lady Gregory puts onstage in one tableau all the political tension in Ireland in the early 1900s: English versus Irish and authority versus liberty. But—and this is the brilliant stroke—the play is not the high drama of historical tragedy; it's a comedy. What's more, the principle of the play is reversal: The figure of law (a police sergeant) will become the figure of rebellion (a wandering ballad singer). Whereas tragedy is the domain of fate, of a world that cannot be changed, comedy is the domain of transformation, the hopeful view that the world can be changed through human effort. That is the worldview of Lady Gregory.

## Lady Gregory: Prolific Playwright

- Lady Gregory was a remarkably prolific playwright, mainly creating plays that focused on the day-to-day, comic interactions of ordinary Irish men and women. Gregory had a natural capacity to reproduce the speech patterns, vocabulary, and expressions of the ordinary people and had a true affection and regard for them.
- During the first decades of the Abbey Theatre, it was Gregory who consistently provided material for the players. Further, her work was the most frequently re-performed of all the Abbey writers and was nearly always received with acclaim. The people responded enthusiastically to seeing themselves onstage in Gregory's work, and she greatly valued their approval.
- In one of her earliest plays, *The White Cockade*, she tells the story of Patrick Sarsfield, the gallant leader of the Jacobite forces in the Williamite wars. Near the end of the play, Sarsfield exclaims

that the true winner in history is the man who “writes his name in the book of the people.” This is the same concept that we saw in Gregory’s fascination with the figure of Raftery, the blind, wandering poet who, as she wrote in *Poets and Dreamers*, has “written in the book of the people.” This seems to have been Gregory’s own desire.

- The development of Gregory’s attitudes toward history and politics is reflected in her plays, which became the written document of some of her deepest beliefs about Ireland and its complex, evolving identity.

### ***The Rising of the Moon***

- *The Rising of the Moon* takes its name from an Irish rebel ballad that memorializes the Rising of 1798 and the courageous but failed efforts of the people to overthrow the British army. Thus, this play has as its foundation the most serious of themes: the conflict between the British conqueror and the Irish people.
- In the play’s opening lines, we might at first think that we have all the makings of a historical tragedy. Three policemen are putting up posters of a wanted felon whom they are seeking. The posters are quite vague, giving only an outline of the man’s appearance. As the Sergeant reports, “They say he’s a wonder, that it’s he makes all the plans for the whole organization. There isn’t another man in Ireland would have broken gaol the way he did.”
- The policemen are leery of the setting—a quayside, along the docks, with boats coming and going; one of them remarks that this would be the perfect place for the felon’s friends to bring a boat and smuggle him to safety. But the danger of the setting is also its possibility for transformation: It is a border area, a liminal space where water meets land, where comings and goings occur, where transitions are possible. If the Sergeant is to be brought back to the side of the people, this is the perfect place for that to happen.

- The Sergeant is the most developed character in the play. As he looks at the poster of the wanted man, he muses not on the justice or injustice of his cause, but on the reward that his capture could provide. He then sends the other policemen away to search elsewhere, while he guards this most dangerous and likely spot for the felon to escape.
- At this moment, the Ragged Man appears and tries to slip past the Sergeant. The Sergeant turns and shouts, "Where are you going?" This is the question of the play: Where is each individual going, and where is the nation of Ireland going, as well? The Ragged Man replies that he is "a poor ballad-singer" and tries to get the Sergeant to let him pass, but the Sergeant will not. The singer performs one of his ballads for the Sergeant, but he refuses to listen; his ears are stopped, we might infer, to the voice of the people.
- The Ragged Man then turns to the Sergeant and says that he knows the felon the Sergeant is seeking. He tells the Sergeant how fearsome the felon actually is and relates a story of the felon killing another policeman in similar circumstances: He then offers to watch along with the Sergeant, and together, they climb onto the barrel and sit back to back. It's a great buildup of dramatic tension and interest.
- Instead of the entrance of a new figure or some climactic piece of action, the men simply talk. The Ragged Man makes an effort to bring the Sergeant away from his commitment to law and order and over to the side of justice and freedom. He accomplishes this through folk song and ballad.
- The Sergeant at first tells the Ragged Man to be quiet, but when the man misquotes a song, the Sergeant corrects him: The Ragged Man responds, "But to think of a man like you knowing a song like that."

- We realize that the man is trying to coax from the Sergeant's memory his recollection of the rebel ballads and, by extension, the rebel spirit.
- The Ragged Man then lists a number of rebel ballads, all of which the Sergeant knows. The man speculates that the Sergeant, when he was young, might have sung those songs in the company of the very man for whom he is now lying in wait.
- This prompts the Sergeant into a reverie of self-reflection that unsettles his sense of identity and his role in the world. He realizes that what had seemed like such a clear opposition between himself and the felon is actually a blurry line. Indeed, by the end, he is unsure if he is the man of law or the man of rebellion.
- This is part of the underlying genius of this play: Written in 1902, it suggests that what seems like a clear, black-and-white conflict in Ireland is actually obscure. The apparent figure of English rule can suddenly become the advocate of rebellion.
- The Sergeant then understands what we have suspected for some time: The Ragged Man is himself the felon. As the man sings "The Rising of the Moon," the Sergeant realizes it is a signal and that a boat is waiting below to take the felon to safety. The Sergeant says that he will not let the man go free, and the man reaches into his coat for his weapon, saying with regret, "I thought to do it with my tongue."
- At that moment, the other policemen approach. The man slips behind the barrel and says to the Sergeant, "You won't betray me." The policemen ask the Sergeant if anyone has come this way. "No one," he replies after a pause. He sends the men away, and the Ragged Man emerges.
- The man and the Sergeant then stand looking at each other. It's a powerful contrast to the tableau of the two of them back to back, looking away from each other, on the barrel. Now, they are face to

face, all secrets revealed, confronting each other and confronting themselves. The man departs, and the Sergeant is left alone, pondering what has just occurred. “A hundred pounds reward,” he muses. “I wonder, now, am I as great a fool as I think I am?”

- This conclusion is wonderful. Gregory does not show us a Sergeant who has seen the light and embraced the rebel cause but, rather, an ordinary man who has just done something that could turn his whole culture upside down; he marvels at what made this happen and whether it was a wise or a foolish act.

### Other Plays by Gregory

- Gregory’s dramatic work functioned as the means by and through which she could interrogate Irish history and the Irish identity, asking, in effect, what it means to be Irish and how the Irish identity got to the place it was in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.
- Gregory’s plays are also obsessed with language, speaking, and the power of words to express and to deceive. In the 1904 comedy *Spreading the News*, the whole play turns on untrue rumors about two characters. The play is punctuated with such exclamations as “Did you hear the news?” and “Listen, listen to the news!” Gregory experiments with the power that language has both to deceive and to reveal.
- Another early comedy, *Hyacinth Halvey*, explores the power of language to create reality. All of the play is set outside the post office, the central location of communication in a small town. From here, letters and telegraphs go out, communicating messages and truth but also rumor, gossip, and lies.
- Gregory also enjoyed success with her early tragedies. *The Gaol Gate* is set just outside the gate of Galway Gaol. Again, this is a richly symbolic setting, the place of law and punishment but also a gate or threshold, a place where crossing over from one state to another is possible.

- Part of what made Gregory such a success at the Abbey and her plays so beloved of the people was her ability to render the Irish consciousness in the language that was most recognizable to the Irish audience. This became the famous Kiltartanese of her writing, the dialect in which she rendered the Irish myth cycles into English in the early 1900s.
  - In all this work and writing—her Irish-themed plays, her remarkable gifts with the Irish dialect, her ability to portray real Irish folk on the stage, and her ceaseless efforts to grow and expand in her writing—Gregory revealed herself as truly one of the remarkable figures of her age. Her efforts to found, establish, and sustain the Abbey Theatre were absolutely seminal; without her, the national theatre simply would not have succeeded. And her own plays, the plays of the Irish people, became the very material on which the Abbey thrived.
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## Supplementary Reading

Frazier, *Behind the Scenes*.

Gregory, *Selected Plays*.

## Questions to Consider

1. How is *The Rising of the Moon* representative of Gregory's peasant-play style? In what ways was this play the result of Gregory's development as a writer ever since the 1890s?
2. Gregory developed her own version of the spoken English of the Irish peasantry, which she called Kiltartanese. How did this dialect allow her to become such a successful playwright?

## Early Plays of J. M. Synge

When Yeats advised John Synge to go to the Aran Islands, he could not foresee what the result of that experience would be. Yeats seems to have thought that Synge would become an important scholar of Celtic studies and the Irish language. He did not see that Synge would embrace drama as his great mode of expression. And nobody could see that Synge would become the most important playwright in Irish history and one of the pillars of the Irish Revival movement. Two of his plays, *Riders to the Sea* and *In the Shadow of the Glen*, rank among the most controversial and challenging in the history of Ireland's struggle with its identity.

### Synge and the Dialect of the People

- From his encounters on Aran, J. M. Synge drew the basic plots for four of his seven plays: *In the Shadow of the Glen*, *Riders to the Sea*, *The Playboy of the Western World*, and *The Well of the Saints*. Equally important was the process of writing the book *The Aran Islands*—his poetic account of his experiences in the western islands; the next step would be translating his Aran experience into plays.
- Synge's emphasis on rendering the actual language of the Irish into spoken English for the stage ranks among his greatest achievements. Like Douglas Hyde in his *Love Songs of Connacht* and like Lady Gregory and her Kiltartanese dialect, Synge developed a version of English that followed the patterns and intonations of Irish.

- Synge credited Gregory with showing him the possibilities of this sort of dialect writing, but he went further than she did in experimenting with language and achieved the more luminous and daring production of it in art than any other writer of this period.

### ***In the Shadow of the Glen***

- *In the Shadow of the Glen* is a one-act play set in a rural cottage in County Wicklow. The play is a comedy of domestic marriage, but it is inverted. Whereas a typical comedy of marriage tends toward the marriage ceremony at the end or shows the restoration of the bonds of love with which the marriage began, *Shadow* does the opposite.
  - The play begins with the apparent death of marriage: The opening tableau reveals a corpse stretched out on the kitchen table, covered with a sheet, and a woman apparently preparing to mourn her deceased husband.

The stereotypical setting of “peasant plays” performed at the Abbey Theatre was the interior of a simple country cottage.



- Then, there is a knock on the door, and we get the paradigmatic beginning of dramatic action in a Synge play: the entrance of an outsider into the closed community. The knock is that of a wandering tramp, one of Synge's favorite character types: the nameless figure, not tied to home, land, wealth, or any of the other bourgeois traps that reduce human beings to spiritless automatons.
- The Tramp enters the house and sees the body laid out on the table. In the ensuing conversation, we begin to see that the marriage in this house—between Dan and Nora Burke—was not a happy one. Nora, we learn, was drawn to Dan because of his land and stock. She traded love and passion for material comfort.
- Nora and the Tramp begin to converse about the loneliness of their respective lives. Then, she asks if he would mind sitting with the body for a bit, while she walks to the nearest farm to meet a farmer. The Tramp, after some hesitation, agrees.
- After Nora leaves, Dan Burke rises up, apparently quite alive. Dan reveals that he has been playing dead because "I've a bad wife in the house." Moments later, Nora returns with the farmer, Michael Dara. After some conversation, the Tramp sits in a corner and seems to sleep. Nora and Michael talk, and Nora reveals that she sympathizes with the wild folk in the hills, that she feels her youth passing, and that she longs to have children.
- Michael doesn't really hear her as she talks about the realities of aging and death; his focus is on the money she has harbored away from Dan and the fortune they can make by joining his land and sheep to her land and its holdings. At this point, Dan rises up from the table and throws Nora out of the house. Michael finds Nora far less appealing without the land and herds he thought he was going to get with her. He is hardly the figure of nobility or heroism that Nora remembers in the dashing men of old.

- As Nora prepares to leave, the Tramp turns to her and says, “We’ll be going now, lady of the house—the rain is falling, but the air is kind and maybe it’ll be a grand morning by the grace of God.”
  - Nora says that she will catch her death walking the wild roads, but the Tramp responds by evoking the free life of the road and his sense of oneness with, and love of, the created world. This speech moves Nora and, in effect, restores her to her own natural values.
  - Thus, she leaves with the Tramp, abandoning the safe but loveless harbor of the cottage for the dangerous but “alive” quality of the roads and the hillsides. Dan and Michael are left alone in the house, sipping whiskey, a sterile and loveless portrait of futility.
- Nora is an early study of the New Woman emerging in America and Europe at this time, desiring liberation from the constraints of home and husband. Synge seems to have great sympathy for Nora. When he heard a version of a folktale of the unfaithful wife on the Aran Islands, the woman’s point of view was not even considered, but Synge, in effect, makes this Nora’s play.
- The other hero figure is, of course, the Tramp, a nameless wanderer whose behavior toward Nora is far more honorable than that of her husband or her potential lover. Synge glorifies the man who is without a home, job, or place in society; he shows his own alienation from society and his disgust with what society makes people do, how it dehumanizes them and forces them into constraints that threaten to drive them mad.
- We can see why the Irish audience was outraged at this representation of the Irish home and Irish womanhood. To some, it seemed that Synge had insulted the Irish home and family, right when Irish nationalists were trying to establish Ireland as a coherent whole after the ravages of the famine and the centuries of English oppression.

## ***Riders to the Sea***

- Like *Shadow*, *Riders to the Sea* is a one-act play, but it is pure tragedy. The plot also derived from Synge's experiences on Aran, where he heard the story of a man who had drowned and washed ashore weeks later.
- Synge transformed this story into a powerful depiction of a community of women—Maurya, the mother, and Cathleen and Nora, her daughters—who must watch passively as the men in their lives fall victim to the unrelenting power of the sea.
  - At the play's opening, the daughters discuss the clothing taken off a drowned man in Donegal; they are trying to determine if the clothing might belong to Michael, their brother, who has been missing at sea for days. Maurya is resting, exhausted from her vigil of praying for Michael to come home.
  - As this death watch unfolds, we learn that the last surviving son, Bartley, is himself planning to go out to sea that day. In this play, to be a man means to go out to sea, which is the testing place of manhood and the certain doom of all men. Eventually, the sea will win; eventually, death will come. The sense of inevitability is nearly overwhelming in this play.
- The sisters have a glimmer of faith that there might be another power at work in the world. They report that "the young priest" has reassured them that "the Almighty God won't leave [Maurya] destitute with no son living."
  - But near the play's end, Maurya will state, "It's little the like of him knows of the sea," implying that the strength of the Christian God is a small thing compared to the power of the pagan sea.
  - Maurya is a voice of doom throughout the play, but because of her archetypal role as ancient mother, she is the one who

understands the nature of island life and the certain doom that envelopes them all.

- Thus, when Bartley is taking his leave, she remains silent when he offers her his blessing, rather than replying with the traditional blessing in response. The daughters berate her for this, eventually convincing Maurya to go after Bartley, to give him her blessing and a loaf of bread for his journey.
- While Maurya is away, the sisters examine more carefully the clothes of the drowned man. Nora looks at his stockings and can tell by the stitching that she knitted them. The spinning wheel is one of the props in the corner of the cottage, and the motif of spinning, knitting, and weaving is reminiscent of the Fates in Greek tragedy: The three women in this play function like the Fates, spinning out the thread of life, then watching it get cut prematurely.
- Maurya returns, walking as if in a trance. She tells them that she has had a terrible vision of a gray pony, led by Bartley and ridden by Michael. When she tried to give Bartley her blessing, “something choked the words in my throat.” Immediately after this, they hear the sounds of women lamenting; soon, the women enter and inform them that Bartley was knocked into the sea by the gray pony and drowned.
- In the final tableau, Maurya wraps herself in her shawl, becoming a vision of the mourning mother, eternally lamenting the death by drowning of all her men. “They’re all gone now,” she states, “and there isn’t anything more the sea can do to me.”
- Maurya has attained a kind of equanimity at the end; she is beyond the power of the sea, but only because there is nothing left that the sea can take from her. In her final lines, she recites a litany of all the men she has lost and asks for God’s mercy on them.
- The play distills into an incredibly concentrated expression a life lived always in the presence of death. The certainty of death is

*Riders to the Sea* is a universal expression of humanity's inevitably losing struggle with the great elemental forces of the world.



stitched into the very fabric of life, like the stitches in a drowned man's socks. When we think of Synge himself, already dying of Hodgkin's disease and probably aware of this, the sense of death-in-life is palpable indeed. The play is a poetic evocation of the life of the islanders and an expression of the heroic yet futile life of all humanity.

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## Supplementary Reading

Kiberd, *Synge and the Irish Language*.

Synge, *The Playboy of the Western World and Other Plays*.

## Questions to Consider

1. In what ways was the figure of the tramp particularly valued in Synge's imagination? How was this signaled in *In the Shadow of the Glen*?
2. How does the community of women function in *Riders to the Sea*? Why does Synge devote most of the play's dialogue to the female figures?

## Synge's *Playboy of the Western World*

J. M. Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World* rocked not just Dublin theatre but modernism as a whole: It established a new standard for a theatre of passion, poetry, and grand gesture, and it set an astonishing precedent for the power of art to provoke a frenzy of protest and offense. What is it about this play that gave it such power to move and offend its audience? And how could this play be rejected by the very people whose culture and language it sought to celebrate and, at the same time, be acclaimed as one of the masterpieces of 20th-century drama? We'll examine the play in this lecture to determine the mystery behind its indubitable power.

### The Opening of *The Playboy*

- The setting of *The Playboy of the Western World* is a country pub. It's empty, except for an attractive young woman named Pegeen Mike. She sits at a table, writing a list of the things she'll need for her wedding.
- A woman writing onstage is already daring. Pegeen is associated with writing, expression, and the power of words; indeed, the power of words is a major concern in this play. Further, the woman's name, Pegeen Mike, is a curious combination of male and female. We might suspect that gender roles will be subject to pressure in this play.
- The next figure to enter is Shawn Keogh, Pegeen's intended. But he goes by Shaneen, a diminutive feminizing of his name that can be seen as affectionate or, more likely when Pegeen calls him this,

contemptuous. Shaneen is indeed a pathetic version of manhood, frightened of just about everything.

- Pegeen and Shawn are joined by Pegeen's father, Michael James, and his cronies. They are interested only in drinking, being perfectly content to leave the running of the pub to Pegeen.
- Thus, the play begins with a crisis of manhood, a crisis borne by Pegeen, given that she is the only young woman in the play and apparently must content herself to marry Shawn. She takes a male nickname as if to supply the male potency that she cannot find in the society around her. It is a society in need of regeneration, of a change that will bring back vigor and potency.

### **Entrance of the Stranger**

- Now, a new character enters, and the tired, inside world is challenged by the outside world. This "slight young man" is Christy Mahon. He asks meekly for a glass of porter.
- Christy asks whether the police often come to the house and is relieved to hear that they don't. The other characters, naturally, wonder what he has done, but he only hints that it's something terrible.
- Only Pegeen is not impressed. "You did nothing at all," she says scathingly. "You're only saying it." This is one of the play's key oppositions: words versus deeds. Christy responds: "I killed my poor father, Tuesday was a week."
- This brings a hush to the pub; it is the totemic deed of classical tragedy: the son slaying the father. Suddenly, we have veered from apparent comedy to apparent tragedy, yet strangely, the other characters respond with admiration and respect.
- The men in the pub want to hear the story; now that they have an epic deed in their midst, they want the words to match the deed.

Christy tells them, providing enough detail to paint a picture of a daring and dramatic action.

- Pegeen exclaims that if Christy could work and live in the pub, she wouldn't be afraid of anything, even with all the other men gone. The men agree and go off to drink at a neighbor's wake, leaving Christy with Pegeen and the unhappy Shawn, whom Pegeen quickly hustles out the door.
- Pegeen encourages Christy to tell more of his story, and we begin to see, as she does, that Christy has more than a touch of the poet in him. He enlarges on the story, describing his father as the savage male who oppresses and chokes the life out of his son.
- Now another character, the Widow Quin, enters; she and Pegeen compete to see who will win Christy's affection. Christy chooses to stay with Pegeen, and the first act comes to an end.
- So far, this play seems strange. What began as comedy seems to approach tragedy, but the great tragic deed, the slaying of the father, is treated in a comic fashion. Seeing how everyone treats him when they know what he has done makes Christy, the father-murderer, wish he'd done the deed years ago.

## **Act II: Christy as Poet**

- The second act opens in the morning, perhaps a day or two later. Christy is now showing signs of vanity and boasting about his deed. He is taking a place among the local legends, the figures of rebellion and lawlessness to whom the society is drawn. Pegeen alone is not impressed. In response to his growing love for Pegeen, Christy becomes even more eloquent and poetic. He describes his great loneliness, voicing the alienation that is characteristic of Synge's work.
- Sympathy for Christy's loneliness begins to soften Pegeen. He praises her beauty and indicates his growing love: "It's little I'm understanding myself, saving only that my heart's scalded this

day, and I going off stretching out the earth between us, the way I'll not be waking near you another dawn of the year till the two of us do arise to hope or judgment with the saints of God." We see here the birth of a poet as Christy warms to language—*words*—to match the heroic nature of his *deed*.

### Act III: Christy as Hero

- By the third act, Christy is in full-blown heroic mode. He competes in the local athletic games and is victorious at them all. It seems as if the slaying of his father has allowed Christy to shed all the inhibitions and reserve of life and to emerge reborn and fully alive.
- Pegeen is more drawn to him than ever, but she fears now that he will leave her. Christy protests, telling Pegeen that his love for her is so great he pities God himself, condemned to loneliness for eternity, whereas Christy and Pegeen have profound love. The language here is at once erotic and poetic.
- Pegeen is increasingly moved by Christy's language of love and passion. He assures her that he is speaking the truth about his love, and she associates his arrival with a miracle of God. We realize that this is indeed a miracle play, a portrayal of the miracle of human love. Yet at the same time, it is a play filled with realism. This balance of the rapturous and the earthly is part of Synge's genius.
- Previously, in the second act, a fierce old man had appeared, claiming to be looking for his worthless son who hit him on the head with a loy (a spade), then fled.
  - When Christy first sees the old man, he instantly reverts to the cowering, sniveling boy we might suspect he was all along.
  - The Widow Quin is the only one who knows what's happening. She hides Christy but draws out the father's version of the story: that Christy was lazy and weak, always looking at himself in the mirror, terrified of women, unable to hold drink

or tobacco—in short, as far from being the playboy of the Western world as can be imagined.

- The widow convinces Old Mahon to go try to find his son, then confronts Christy with his lies. But Christy protests that his father was a horror and that he has been redeemed by his love for Pegeen. The widow tries to get Christy to choose her instead, but he remains true to Pegeen. He goes off to win the games, but his father returns at the height of Christy's triumph.
- Pegeen announces to her father and Shawn that she will marry Christy. This is Christy's peak moment, which means that his fall is imminent.
  - Old Mahon charges in with a crowd behind him. He rushes at Christy and knocks him to the ground.
  - Now, the play's tensions are truly center stage: Is Christy merely words, or is he capable of great deeds? Can the son overcome the father, or is the father an indomitable, tyrannizing force? Is a rapturous love possible, or is the modern world a deadening realm in which love is a fool's illusion?
- The crowd turns on Christy completely, crying, "You're a liar!" Old Mahon approaches his son threateningly, saying "Rise up now to retribution, and come on with me." But Christy protests: "You've seen my doings this day"—as if the false deed of having killed his father can be overcome by true deeds now. Pegeen looks at Christy in scorn and cries: "That's it, now the world will see him pandied, and he an ugly liar was playing off the hero."
- Christy cries to the crowd, "If you're after making a mighty man of me this day by the power of a lie, you're setting me now to think if it's a poor thing to be lonesome, it's worse maybe to go mixing with the fools of the earth." Christy is emerging as the superman, rising above common humanity. He picks up a loy nearby and chases

his father out the door. There is a noise offstage, then silence, and Christy comes in as if in a daze.

- It seems that he has really killed his father now. The Widow Quin tries to drag him away, but he insists he won't leave Pegeen. The Widow argues that there's nothing special about Pegeen, but Christy sees her through the eyes of love.
- The crowd wants to hang Christy for his crime. At the start of the play, they idolized him for his daring deed, because it was safely a long way off; now, they will crucify him for the same deed, because it is real; it is deeds, not words. Even Pegeen turns on him. Christy faces them all, growing stronger with every moment. They try to bind him, but he fights until they burn his leg and drop him to the ground.
- Just at that moment, Old Mahon crawls back in, still alive. He and Christy face each other, both on their knees on the pub floor. Mahon stands and unties his son, announcing that the two of them will leave this place in scorn. But Christy won't follow anyone now; he is completely liberated from all ties to authority and judgment.
- The father, amazed at his son, proceeds out the door. Christy also leaves, and only Pegeen realizes what has happened: that the one liberated man in the world has just left her life. She places her shawl over her head and breaks into wild lamentations before the curtain comes down.

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## Supplementary Reading

Synge, *The Playboy of the Western World and Two Other Irish Plays*.

Welch, *The Abbey Theatre, 1899–1999*.

## Questions to Consider

1. Synge's *Playboy* is considered one of the triumphs of modern drama. In particular, his conception of the hero (and the heroine) is remarkable.

How does Synge present the arc of development of Christy and Pegeen, and what does this tell us about his view of heroism in the modern age?

2. *Playboy* is also well known for the riots that greeted it in both Dublin and America. How can you account for this response to the play? In what ways does the historical situation in Ireland in 1907 help us understand the play's controversial reception?

# The Dublin Lockout and World War I

**T**he Irish Republican Army (IRA) came onto the world stage in the late 1960s and early 1970s, but its roots can be found in the mid- and late-19th-century movements that themselves were a response to earlier events in Irish history. The story of the Dublin Lockout of 1913 is embedded within those historical developments, and when that story is combined with the catastrophic events of the First World War, the stage is set for the signal events of modern Irish history: the Easter Rising of 1916, the Irish War of Independence of 1919–1921, and the Irish Civil War of 1922–1923.

### Backdrop to the Lockout

- During the Great Famine of 1845–1849, as millions of people were either dying of starvation and disease or fleeing the country, Daniel O’Connell was realizing the futility of his efforts to repeal the Act of Union between England and Ireland. A group of younger radicals, dissatisfied with O’Connell’s pacifism, determined to pursue a more violent path.
- This was the Young Ireland movement, and it led to rebellion in 1848. The rebellion was a dismal failure, but several of the leaders escaped Ireland, including John O’Mahony, who fled to Paris, then the United States, where he founded the Fenian Brotherhood. The Fenians were dedicated to the principles of republicanism articulated by Wolfe Tone and the United Irishmen in the Rising of 1798.
- Another Young Ireland leader, James Stephens, also fled to Paris, then eventually returned to Ireland and, in 1858, founded



the Irish partner to the Fenian Brotherhood, the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB). Over time, this group would transform into the IRA. These two organizations worked together to engineer armed raids into Canada in the late 1860s. They hoped to distract British attention from Ireland while they planned an 1867 rising.

The election of John F. Kennedy, an Irish Catholic from Boston, to the American presidency stood as a watershed accomplishment for the group of emigres who came to America during the Great Famine.

- This rising also failed, largely because of uncoordinated planning and a lack of arms but also because of informers. British intelligence knew of the plans, and most of the leaders had already been arrested before the event took place.
  - This rising declared again the principles of Irish republicanism, and it kept alive the tradition of armed revolt against the British, leading to the famous example of the Manchester Martyrs. These were three Fenians who were convicted of killing a Manchester policeman after freeing convicted IRB members. For this, they were put to death.
  - The main membership of the IRB saw that armed revolt was not feasible at this time and turned to supporting the Land League and parliamentary reform.

## Assassination

- When Michael Davitt and Charles Stewart Parnell formed the Irish Land League in 1879, unifying the tenant farmers and small landholders against the unjust system of landlordism and the great estates, the Land War began. It would run off and on for three years, until 1882, when Parnell was released from prison and committed himself to the nonviolent Home Rule movement.
- Once again, however, a more radical wing of the Land movement was dissatisfied with Parnell's peaceful, parliamentary tactics and

Dublin Castle  
was the center of  
British authority in  
Ireland until 1922.



resolved to take a more violent approach. In 1882, this led to one of the most notorious acts in Irish rebel history: the assassination of the chief secretary for Ireland, Lord Frederick Cavendish, and his under-secretary, Thomas Henry Burke, in the Phoenix Park in Dublin.

- This act of what we would now call terrorism was performed by the Invincibles, an extremist republican group that grew out of the Fenian movement and broke away from the IRB.
  - Cavendish and Burke were walking toward the Viceregal Lodge in the Phoenix Park, on the western edge of Dublin, when they were approached by seven individuals who stabbed them to death, using surgical knives.
  - The British response was swift: Likely culprits and accomplices were arrested and taken to Dublin Castle, the seat of the British intelligence network. Soon, various participants were informing or being compelled to inform on others; supposed ringleaders were captured, and eventually, five were executed.

## **The Dublin Lockout**

- At the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Ireland did not have developed industry and virtually no system of workers' rights or union organization. The bulk of the Irish were tenant farmers, small landowners, shop owners, clerks, or lower-level civil service employees. Only in the North was there advanced industry, primarily in the Belfast shipyards and linen mills.
- Worker unrest grew in Dublin, as did agitation against the deplorable living conditions in the tenements. The Irish slums were the worst in all of Europe, with dozens of people living in single rooms and rampant disease and starvation. Despite these appalling circumstances, Irish labor was slow to organize, partly because Irish politics was focused overwhelmingly on nationalism and the Home Rule issue.

Today, an impressive statue of James Larkin stands on O'Connell Street, the site of key battles between the strikers of the lockout and the police.



- In 1908, a British union organizer named James Larkin came to Dublin to organize the dock workers. He formed the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union, a group of the city's unskilled labor that counted 10,000 members by 1913.
- Perhaps the most powerful man in Dublin at this time was William Martin Murphy, a conservative nationalist and owner of the Dublin United Tramway Company. Murphy was virulently anti-union, and he demanded that all his tram workers stay out of Larkin's new union.
- In response, Larkin called on all the tram workers to go on strike, and he urged other worker groups in Dublin to join with sympathy strikes. On August 26, 1913, the Dublin conductors and tram workers walked off the job. Murphy had already arranged the support of the Dublin Metropolitan Police and the Royal Irish Constabulary for his cause. He and other major employers locked out the workers and brought in strikebreakers to replace them.
- Confrontations among striking workers, strikebreakers, and police soon erupted. On August 31, the police charged a crowd gathered to hear Larkin speak, killing two people. International labor expressed outrage at the situation in Dublin. Food and money were sent from British unions to support the Irish workers.
- The church was solidly on the side of the owners and discouraged unionism among the populace. At the same time, British business owners and manufacturers also sent money to support Irish manufacturers. The hope of the workers—and the fear of the owners—was that a corresponding general strike in Britain would occur, but this never developed. The Irish were largely on their own.
- In the face of escalating violence, Larkin and his fellow leader James Connolly formed the Irish Citizen Army in November 1913. This volunteer militia accompanied strikers and did what

they could to protect them from the police. But the movement eventually ended in the workers' defeat. By early 1914, Larkin announced that they would have to give up. Dublin was not ready for an organized labor movement, and support from abroad had dried up.

## World War I

- Between the 1913 lockout and the Easter Rising, the greatest cataclysm of early-20<sup>th</sup>-century European history erupted: World War I. This was the end of Western man's innocence and of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century myth of progress. The dominant intellectual mood following World War I suggested that, in fact, humanity was regressing and that we were further from God than ever before. Far from leading to enlightenment, human thought and effort were leading us to our doom.
- The conflation of new technologies and old techniques of warfare led to battles of incredible slaughter. For example, in the first Battle of the Somme in 1916, 110,000 British soldiers began approaching the German lines on the first morning; by nightfall, 60,000 were killed or wounded. By the end of the four-month battle, the British army had suffered 420,000 casualties. The French lost 200,000 men, and the Germans, nearly 500,000.
- When the war broke out and England declared war against Germany and the Central Powers, Ireland had an uneasy relationship with the United Kingdom. Ardent nationalists wanted no part in a war to defend their enemy. But another element, led by John Redmond, head of the Irish Parliamentary Party, felt that Ireland had an opportunity to prove its loyalty and value by supporting England in the war.
- Redmond and the British prime minister, the Liberal H. H. Asquith, had agreed on a true Home Rule bill that became law on September 18, 1914, but the interruption of the war put the enactment of the bill on hold for a time. Redmond felt that this

was fair and was determined that Ireland would show its loyalty to England and, thereby, justify the granting of Home Rule.

- Urged on by Redmond and by a sense of honor, nearly 140,000 Irishmen enlisted in the army of England. Nearly all were from the lowest ranks of the military. More than a third of them, 50,000, would die during the war. But their sacrifice was soon overshadowed by the struggle of the nationalists in the Easter Rising of 1916 and the Irish War of Independence in 1919–1921.
  
- Among the Irish casualties of the war was Robert Gregory, the beloved son of Lady Gregory, who enlisted in the Connacht Rangers in September 1915, even though he was 34 years old and had three children. From the Rangers, he joined the Royal Flying Corps. Robert was an extraordinarily brave and successful fighter pilot. It is nearly certain that he had a dogfight with the famous Red Baron, Manfred von Richtofen, in 1917, and he may have managed to ground the Baron—something no other Allied pilot achieved.
  - In January 1918, Robert was shot down by friendly fire and died. Lady Gregory was devastated. Her ardent nationalism was tested by the war effort and the fact of Robert’s role in the British military, particularly after the Easter Rising in 1916. But Robert’s death went beyond politics for her.
  
  - She asked Yeats if he would write a poem that would commemorate her son’s life and death. He wrote several, the most famous of which is “An Irish Airman Foresees His Death.” In this poem, Yeats made the bold decision to speak in Robert’s own voice and to show him anticipating his imminent death.
  
  - In the poem’s conclusion, Yeats evokes an image of Robert almost enjoying the experience of war for the clarity, the repose, and the remarkable serenity it seemed to give him. The final lines are a balance of *joie de vivre* and an almost

### Excerpt from “An Irish Airman Foresees His Death”

by W. B. Yeats

Nor law, nor duty bade me fight,  
Nor public man, nor cheering crowds,  
A lonely impulse of delight  
Drove to this tumult in the clouds;  
I balanced all, brought all to mind,  
The years to come seemed waste of breath,  
A waste of breath the years behind  
In balance with this life, this death.

despairing exhaustion—a fitting elegy not just for one man but for the experience of the war as a whole.

- Robert Gregory stands almost as an emblem of the contradictions in Irish identity at this time: He loved his country yet fought on behalf of its colonizer; a born gentleman, he felt a kinship with the common peasantry. These are the contradictions and oppositions that defined Ireland in 1916, when on an Easter Monday morning, the Irish Volunteers rose up in rebellion against British rule.

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## Supplementary Reading

Townshend, *Ireland: The Twentieth Century*.

Yeates, *Lockout*.

## Questions to Consider

1. In what ways did the Great Famine, Irish migration to America, and the formation of the Fenian and Irish Republican Brotherhood movements all connect?

2. How would you characterize the Irish experience of World War I? In what ways does Yeats's "An Irish Airman Foresees His Death" reflect the complexities of the Irish experience of the war?

# The 1916 Easter Rising

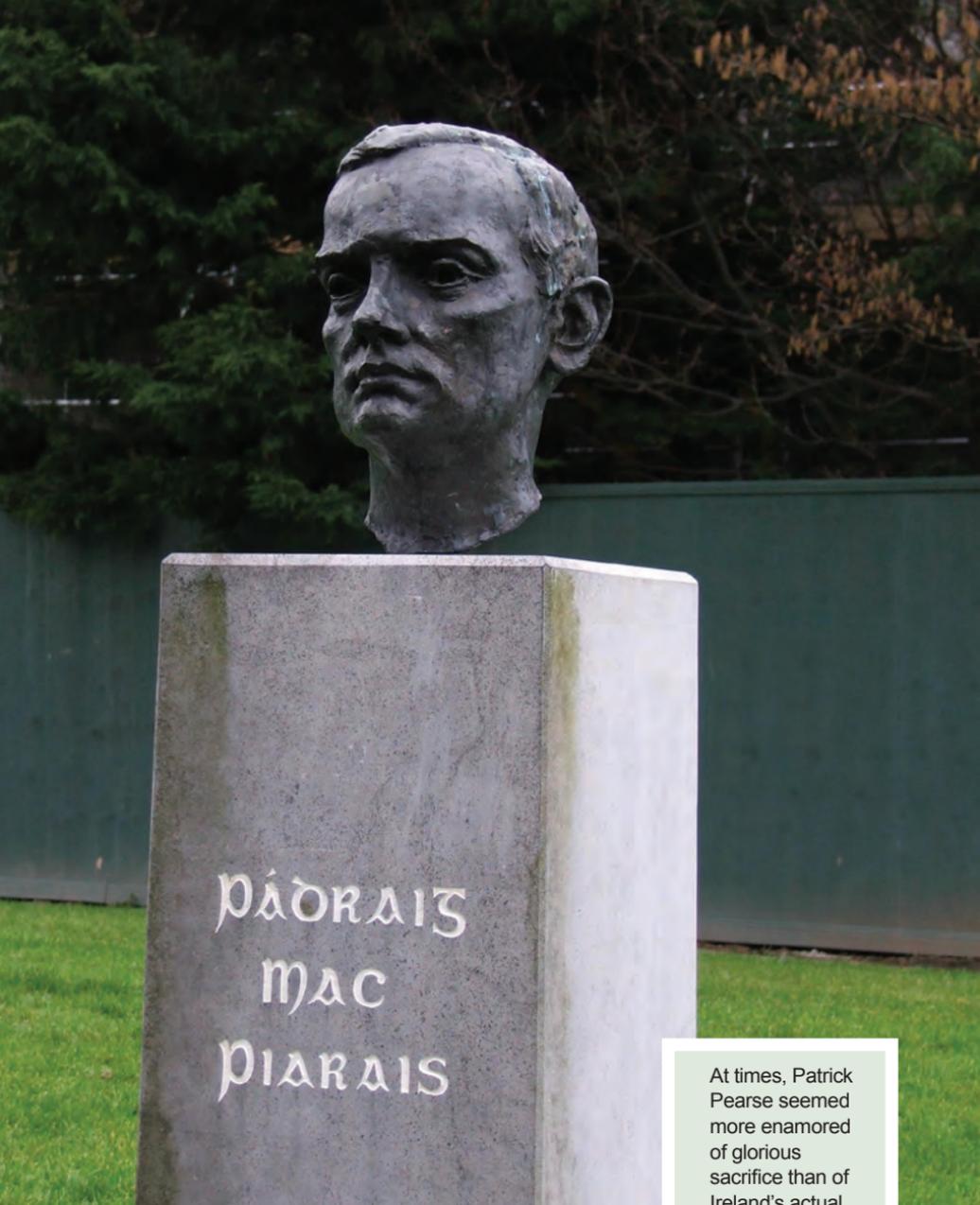
The story of the Easter Rising of 1916 is one of breathtaking bravery but also apparent foolhardiness. The venture undertaken by the rebels was doomed to fail, and it would have failed, except for the atrocious response by the British, who paradoxically guaranteed the success of the rebellion they were seeking to stop. Ultimately, its phenomenal success was a function of the British response to it, which was equal parts brutal and idiotic. In this lecture, we'll look at what led to the rising and the actual events of that Easter Week. We'll also use the lens of poetry to reflect on the enduring power of the rising—an event that, as Yeats claimed, transformed Ireland forever.

### Home Rule: Opposing Forces

- Ireland and Britain had been moving toward some sort of Home Rule structure since the 1880s. The first two Home Rule bills of 1886 and 1893 were defeated in Parliament. A third bill was proposed in 1912 that seemed likely to pass because Irish political leverage had increased.
- In September 1914, the Home Rule bill was approved. But because World War I had broken out the previous month, it was agreed to suspend the Home Rule action until the war ended. John Redmond believed that he had achieved the promise of Home Rule; this was part of his reasoning for pledging Ireland's support to England in the war effort.
- However, younger, more radical leaders, remembering with bitterness the fall of Parnell and distrusting political policy,

demanded a full split from England. They were dissatisfied with the terms of Home Rule, which would keep Ireland within the United Kingdom in a commonwealth relationship. They wanted full independence and true Irish rule.

- This group, termed *separatists*, saw England's engagement in World War I as their best opportunity for seizing power and forcing England to release its hold on Ireland.
- They determined that a bold armed uprising would mobilize the population and, perhaps, lead to an overthrow of British rule, particularly at a time when England, occupied with the European war, might not be able to spare the manpower and resources necessary to suppress a large-scale rebellion.
- The younger leaders emerged primarily from the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB) and were committed to the idea of armed resistance. The more veteran leadership, in contrast, preferred a more gradual political and cultural, as opposed to military, transformation of Ireland. This less violent approach was personified in Eoin MacNeill, the chief of staff of the Irish Volunteers.
- The younger leadership found its most eloquent spokesman and stirring leader in Patrick Pearse. Pearse was himself a poet and Irish-language teacher and, hence, a firm believer in the cultural revolution in Ireland. At the same time, Pearse believed that blood sacrifice was both necessary and desirable for Ireland's true independence from Britain.
- The prospect of Home Rule prompted grave concern in the Protestant North, where *Home Rule* was equated with *Rome rule*, an imposition of Catholic (and foreign) rule on the Protestants.
  - The Protestant majority in the North consisted largely of Scottish Presbyterians who had emigrated beginning in the early 1600s. Over time, the Protestants had grown to be a



PÁDRAIG  
MAC  
PIAIRÍS

At times, Patrick Pearse seemed more enamored of glorious sacrifice than of Ireland's actual political freedom.

fiercely protective northern majority, who believed a Catholic-controlled Ireland would mean both economic ruin and the demise of their cultural identity.

- In January 1913, the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) was formed. This was a paramilitary organization that quickly developed into a military force to be reckoned with.
- In response to the formation of the UVF, the Irish Volunteers were formed in 1914. This group would eventually absorb the Citizens' Army that had organized in the Dublin Lockout the previous year. Its leadership included many of the radicals from the IRB.
- From the British point of view, this situation was all but intractable: In Ulster, no compromise was possible; significant armed resistance would meet any effort at imposing a Catholic-majority Home Rule. In the rest of Ireland, the threat of armed rebellion against British rule was growing.

## Plans for the Rising

- In January 1916, the radical leadership of the Irish Volunteers began planning to stage a rising on Easter Sunday. The Irish Volunteers were significantly reduced by the war effort; the remainder formed a separate group, the National Volunteers, numbering about 11,000. This was the force counted on for the rising.
- A major need of this group was for modern weapons: They depended on foreign munitions shipments and covert gun-running efforts to arm themselves. A key component of the plan was for a large arms shipment from Germany to arrive the week of the rising on the west coast of Ireland.
- The hope was that a rising in Dublin could be coordinated with additional risings throughout the countryside, and Britain would be forced to capitulate. But the arms shipment failed. Eoin MacNeill decided to cancel the rising and issued his countermanding order on the night of Good Friday. He dispatched an emissary to the

countryside to alert the local commanders that the rising was off. But the military council of the Irish Volunteers, now firmly in the hands of Pearse and his associates, determined to hold the rising anyway.

## Easter Monday

- On Easter Monday, 1,500 rebels occupied a number of buildings and sites throughout central Dublin. Most significant was the General Post Office (GPO), where James Connolly and Patrick Pearse were headquartered. It was on the steps of the GPO that Pearse read the Proclamation of the Irish Republic at the start of the rising.
- If the rebels truly believed that the citizenry of Ireland would rise up and join them, they were sorely disappointed. Only a handful of sporadic actions occurred in the countryside. Further, only one-third of the Dublin force turned out; the plan of holding multiple sites throughout the city depended on communication and swift reinforcement that was impossible given the paucity of rebel soldiers. It was easy for the British army to isolate and neutralize each location.
- The army response was excessive and took little notice of the difference between civilian and rebel. General John Maxwell, commander of the British forces in Dublin, declared martial law and responded with brutal suppression.
  - Maxwell was declared military governor and promptly arrested more than 3,500 people. He was particularly eager to make a punitive example of the leaders.
  - Over the next 12 days, he executed 15 of the most prominent leaders of the rising, starting with Pearse, Thomas MacDonagh and Thomas Clarke, who were shot at Kilmainham Gaol. James Connolly was shot sitting down because he was too wounded to stand.

- With each execution, the disclosure of the rebels' poems and letters, and the clear understanding that these were not German pawns or selfish criminals, public sympathy for the rebels grew. Soon, international outrage was voiced over the executions. Asquith hurried to Dublin and halted the killings, but irreparable damage had been done. The British response had turned the rebels into martyrs and turned what might have been almost a farce into a stirring act of sacrifice and heroism for Ireland.

## **“Easter 1916”**

- The legacy and impact of the Easter Rising was profound. It has been called the most decisive event in modern Irish history. Its transformative impact on Irish identity was captured most effectively by W. B. Yeats in his great poem of historical meditation, “Easter 1916.”
- It was not just the tremendous self-sacrifice of the rebels that troubled Yeats but also his knowledge that the dream of the Irish Renaissance was now dashed. Yeats also had to confront the reality that the rebels in Dublin had perhaps made a greater impact on Irish life than he had with all his writing and projects.
- The poem begins with Yeats recalling his previous interactions with the leaders of the rebellion, and revealing the condescension and even scorn with which he used to think of them but also hinting at the passion and life they possessed.
- Yeats suggests that this was not really a personal scorn he felt; it was the nature of Ireland, a place of motley, a comic country that had no serious purpose. But then comes the two-line refrain that defines the poem: “All changed, changed utterly: / A terrible beauty is born.”
- The refrain embodies the sense that Ireland's comic status had been transformed; it was no longer the place where motley was worn. The Easter Martyrs attained the status of high tragedy, making a sacrifice of incredible power and meaning. It has the

### Excerpt from “Easter 1916”

by W. B. Yeats

Too long a sacrifice  
Can make a stone of the heart.  
O when may it suffice?  
That is Heaven’s part, our part  
To murmur name upon name,  
As a mother names her child  
When sleep at last has come  
On limbs that had run wild.  
What is it but nightfall?  
No, no, not night but death;  
Was it needless death after all?  
For England may keep faith  
For all that is done and said.  
We know their dream; enough  
To know they dreamed and are dead;  
And what if excess of love  
Bewildered them till they died?  
I write it out in a verse—  
MacDonagh and MacBride  
And Connolly and Pearse  
Now and in time to be,  
Wherever green is worn,  
Are changed, changed utterly:  
A terrible beauty is born.

beauty of great tragedy. And it is a terrible beauty: This is a blood sacrifice, the wasting of youth and life and promise.

- Yeats then goes on to talk about several of the rebels as he had known them, including Countess Markievicz, Pearse, Thomas MacDonagh, and John MacBride. All of them have been

transformed from what they were—mere human beings—into something remarkable.

- Then, Yeats shifts to the poem's central image: the stone set within the living stream. He describes the vibrancy of the stream and of the life that is like it: The horse and rider, the birds, the clouds, all "minute by minute they live," but "The stone's in the midst of all." In the final stanza, Yeats suggests that the rebels in their sacrifice may well be like the stone: fixed, obsessed, unchanging, and somehow lifeless.
- The suggestion here is that fanatical love of country does not lead to life; rather, it makes the heart into stone—lifeless. This calls into question the nature of the rebels' sacrifice. Yeats asks, "Was it needless death after all?" But he doesn't try to answer the questions of the poem; he doesn't try to determine whether the sacrifice was worth it or whether it will compel England to grant Ireland justice. "That," he says, "is heaven's part."
- As many readers have noted, "Easter 1916" is a troubling poem of praise to the rebels. What actually transforms them is not their actions but the fact of their executions. That is the terrible deed that has elevated their action to the realm of eternal beauty. Theirs is a passive heroism, not an active one. Yeats knew that he was not a man of action, and here, he transfers his passivity to the rebels, almost trying to capture their heroism in his own poetic effort.
- Yeats privately circulated the poem but didn't publish it until 1920, when the War of Independence was raging and it was clear that the Easter Rising had been the event that propelled Ireland toward its ultimate freedom. The sacrifice of Pearse, Connolly, MacDonagh, and the other 12 martyrs was complete: Yeats was at least right that nothing would ever be the same again: "All changed, changed utterly." But what would follow remained to be worked out on the stage of history.

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## Supplementary Reading

Caulfield, *The Easter Rebellion*.

Kostick and Collins, *The Easter Rising*.

## Questions to Consider

1. Why did the Easter Rising fail, militarily speaking, and why did it succeed, politically speaking?
2. How does Yeats's classic poem "Easter 1916" interpret the Easter Rising? What are some of the many factors influencing the ways in which Yeats understood the meanings of the rising?

## Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist*

In *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Joyce uses his semi-autobiographical character, Stephen Dedalus, as a vehicle for exploring the tensions, struggles, and desires that most powerfully haunted Joyce himself. The result is a book that is simultaneously deeply personal and a universal expression of the coming-of-age of the artist in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The book has become a classic of modern literature, and had Joyce not surpassed it with his own *Ulysses*, it might well be considered the greatest novel of the period.

### Joyce in Trieste

- In October 1904, the 22-year-old James Joyce left Dublin with Nora Barnacle to travel in Europe. The pair ultimately settled in Trieste, in the northeast of Italy, on the Adriatic Sea. Joyce soon felt at home in Trieste and would accomplish much of his most significant writing there.
- Joyce actually arrived in Trieste with two early versions of what would become *A Portrait*. He began the novel as a young, emerging writer; by the time he finished, he was a master craftsman, completely confident in his art and prepared to undertake his great labor, *Ulysses*.
- *A Portrait* is a *bildungsroman*, or a novel of education. Such novels show the growth and development of a single character from childhood to adulthood. *Portrait* is also a *künstlerroman*, that is, a novel about the growth specifically of an artist. Stephen's vocation is to be an artist, and his name, Dedalus, comes from the Greek myth of Daedalus and Icarus. Daedalus was the cunning inventor in Greek mythology.

All five senses are invoked in the opening of *A Portrait of the Artist*, as they are in the Catholic mass; it is a rich evocation of how a young child interprets and begins to understand the world.



## Opening of *A Portrait*

- Joyce opens the novel with an epigraph from the story of Daedalus and Icarus in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*: "*Et ignotas animum dimittit in artes*" ("And he applies his mind to unknown arts"). This is the novel's invocation, as it seeks the spirit of the great artist to inform and guide this novel.
- The myth of Daedalus and Icarus also functions as a warning. Stephen mirrors Icarus, the son who does not heed his father's warnings, flies too close to the sun, and plunges to his death. In this, Joyce saw another mythical figure, Lucifer, who is hurled from heaven and plunges to earth in a fiery fall because of his great pride. Stephen has much in common with Lucifer, too, even as his first name calls to mind Saint Stephen, the first Christian martyr, who died for his faith. Joyce suggests that Ireland will ask Stephen to die for his country, and Stephen himself is willing to die for his art.
- Interestingly, the opening words of the novel do not belong to Stephen but to his father, who is telling young Stephen a story. Like all myths of origin, including Genesis, the speaking father articulates the power of creation and the voice of law. If Stephen is to become the teller of tales in his own right, he must find a way to emerge from this father's defining voice and find his own voice and expression.
- The first section of the novel ends with two crucial experiences.
  - First, Stephen thinks of his aunt Dante, who kept two brushes in her closet, one for Michael Davitt, the leader of the Land League, and one for Parnell, the leader of the Home Rule movement. Thus, a nascent awareness of politics and history is already planted in young Stephen's mind.
  - Then, Stephen says something inappropriate and hides under the table in shame. "O, Stephen will apologize," says his mother. And Dante adds, "O, if not, the eagles will come and pull out his eyes." The child then thinks of a sort of nursery

rhyme: “pull out his eyes, apologize, apologize, pull out his eyes.” The themes of wrongdoing, of the forbidden, and of grave punishment—even blinding—are introduced.

- All this is conveyed to us through the sensations and half-remembered impressions of a young child. This is what has come to be called the *stream-of-consciousness style*.
  - In stream-of-consciousness narration, the thoughts, impressions, sensations, and ideas of a character are given on the page as if they are streaming directly out of the person’s mind.
  - For Joyce, at least as important as the story he is telling is the way in which that story is told; the point is as much about the language and how it conveys meaning as it is about the actual meaning or content of the narrative itself. The result is a prose style that is close to poetry.

## Christmas Dinner

- One crucial experience that will shape Stephen’s thinking occurs when he goes home from boarding school for the Christmas holiday. This scene begins in splendor and festivity, with Stephen allowed to eat at the adult table for the first time. This is a coming-of-age moment for Stephen, a rite of passage into adulthood.
- Joining the family is Aunt Dante and a friend of Mr. Dedalus, Mr. Casey, who it turns out, was a Fenian rebel who had been sentenced to hard labor for his political crimes. As the meal begins, the conversation turns to the two great obsessions of Irish culture: politics and religion. Ultimately, the dinner is ruined by an explosive argument between Dante and Mr. Casey concerning the church and the nationalist cause.
- Stephen sits wide-eyed at the table, trying to absorb the dispute and the powerful emotions that drive it. He is baffled at how people with a common love, in this case, their country, can be so opposed

to one another. He is receiving an education in complex politics, religious dispute, and the tensions that can tear apart a family and a country. In the end, he imbibes the lesson that one cannot love both God and country. Between nationalism and religion, there seems to be an irreducible gulf.

## Return to School

- Another crucial experience for Stephen occurs back at school. The schoolyard conversations all deal with sin and punishment, by which Stephen is both fascinated and terrified. Indeed, in some sense, he seems drawn toward sin and punishment.
- Later that day, Stephen sits in Latin class, but he can't participate because his glasses are broken and he is unable to see to do the work. The prefect enters and paddles the hand of an older boy who had written a poor essay. He then spies Stephen and challenges him: "You, boy, who are you?"
  - This is the very question that drives the book: Who are you? What is your identity? Are you your father's child or your own independent person? What is your vocation, and what will you become?
  - He then asks, "Why are you not writing like the others?" This, too, resonates in the novel. Stephen, to the extent that he is modeled on the young James Joyce, will certainly not write like any other writers in English. The twin themes of identity and vocation are both challenged by this priest.
- The prefect chooses not to believe Stephen's excuse of the broken glasses and paddles his hand in front of the class. This is the punishment Stephen has feared throughout the novel, and the fact that it is unjust reflects something of Joyce's thoughts on punishment as a whole—extended all the way to the doctrine of original sin and the orthodox condemnation of human beings for being human.

- Stephen recovers from the pain but not from the cruelty. The older boys tell him he ought to go tell the rector, which he does. As he walks to the rector's office, he thinks of the great men in history and the famous Irish rebels who preceded him in calling authority into question.
- He tells the rector of the unfair punishment, persisting until the priest finally says, "Very well, it is a mistake and I shall speak to Father Dolan myself. Will that do now?" In a remarkable reversal of power, the priest becomes supplicant to Stephen, and Stephen triumphs against injustice, cruelty, and to some extent, the power and authority of the church itself. But this confrontation merely prefigures the larger confrontation with the church that still awaits Stephen.

## Adolescence

- The second part of the novel focuses on Stephen's emergence into adolescence and a keen awareness of sexuality. As with the conflicts of politics and religion, when it comes to conflicts of a sexual nature, Stephen finds himself without a reliable father figure to help him understand what is happening to him or how to negotiate the many voices that seek to influence him.
- A key element of this section is the decline of the family fortunes: Mr. Dedalus has lost his position and wealth. The Dedalus family is forced to move from one house to another, eventually ending up in tenement housing on Dublin's impoverished north side.
- But Stephen embraces the new sensations of Dublin, immersing himself in the labyrinth of the city center. As his home life becomes increasingly uncertain, his familiarity with the city grows, as does his longing for a meaningful relationship: "He wanted to meet in the real world the unsubstantial image which his soul so constantly beheld." Stephen seeks to conjoin his imagination with reality—the very challenge faced by the artist.

- Stephen attains academic success at his new school, but the call of many voices for his loyalty begins to overwhelm him: His family calls him to be a good son; his church, to be a good Catholic; the nationalists, “to be true to his country and help to raise up her fallen language and tradition.” All these calls come to seem hollow and meaningless to Stephen. He seeks something beyond these empty vocations.
- In the meantime, his incipient sexuality haunts him, and he turns to the brothels of Dublin. This section ends with Stephen having his first sexual experience with a prostitute; it is a powerful blend of crudity on her part and near-spiritual exaltation on Stephen’s.
- Stephen is far too steeped in Catholicism to embrace his new sexual nature without complication. He frequents the brothels, and in the third part of the novel, we see him surrendering to what he considers his bestial nature, with the concomitant guilt that he has betrayed his own innocence. And he continues to wonder what his vocation will be; the satisfactions of the flesh do not seem to requite the higher calling he feels.
- In the next sequence of the novel, Stephen will encounter a powerful version of the spiritual world that will compel him back to religious orthodoxy; we see him constantly pushed toward one or the other of these polarities. Stephen needs to find a way to unite the flesh and the spirit, the bodily expression and the expression that is not confined to the merely material world. This becomes the challenge Joyce presents in the final sections of this novel—the challenge of the modern artist.

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## Supplementary Reading

Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*.

McCourt, *The Years of Bloom*.

## Questions to Consider

1. How is Joyce's *Portrait* both a traditional coming-of-age novel and a radically new departure for the form of the novel? That is, how is this novel part of a larger tradition in the European novel, and how is it a modernist experimental departure from previous literary forms and traditions?
2. In what ways do Stephen's pivotal experiences in the book connect to the major elements in Irish history and culture that we have been exploring so far in this course?

## Joyce's *Portrait* as Modernist Narrative

In the next section of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Stephen Dedalus and his classmates prepare for a retreat, which will be an opportunity to step away from the concerns of the world and focus on death, judgment, hell, and heaven. For Stephen, this retreat seems to come when he is furthest away from God. His emergence into sexuality and his frequenting of the brothels in Dublin have left him without God's grace, wallowing in what he calls "his sinloving soul." Stephen is a precocious, sensitive, probing young man. His every action and thought is magnified by his remarkable intellect and powerful language; thus, his sense of sin is profound.

### The Retreat

- In *Portrait*, Stephen is obsessed with his own sinfulness. He reflects that his first act of lust compelled him to be guilty of all seven deadly sins, yet he is unable to turn away from the flesh. He also knows that any repentance would be false.
- In this state of mind, Stephen goes with his classmates on a retreat. On the first day, the priest asks, "Oh you who present a smooth smiling face to the world while your soul within is a foul swamp of sin, how will it fare with you in that terrible day?" Stephen walks out of the chapel thinking, "Every word of it was for him. Against his sin, foul and secret, the whole wrath of God was aimed."
- The sermon on hell occurs on the second day of the retreat. The priest begins quietly, focusing on Lucifer: "He offended the majesty of God by the sinful thought of one instant and God cast him out of heaven into hell for ever."

In *Portrait*, after leaving the students with a horrifying vision of hell, the priest defends the justness of God and urges the boys to repent, to confess, and to be absolved.

- Like Icarus, who fell from the skies through disobedience to his father, so, too, Lucifer fell, and so, too, we might suspect that Stephen will fall. The priest then compares Adam and Eve's fall from grace to that of Lucifer. But Jesus comes to redeem humankind by founding the Catholic Church. The priest cautions, however, that if someone is so prideful as to disregard this mercy, "there remained for them an eternity of torment: hell."
- Now, the anatomy of hell begins. The priest delineates its characteristics: the damned heaped together on one another, the putrid nature of the air, the fire, and so on. All of this is described with a luxurious, detailed language that almost seems to delight in the images it evokes. Stephen staggers out of the chapel trembling, feeling as if every word of the sermon was meant especially for him. He longs to repent but feels he cannot confess his sins in the college chapel.
- Stephen returns to the chapel for the final part of the sermon. Here, the priest focuses on the experience of eternal torment: the pain of the loss of God's presence, the pain of conscience—especially acute, he says, for "the lover of artistic pleasures"—the pain of regret for failing to repent when there was still time, the pain of extension, the pain of intensity.





- At the end of the sermon, the priest urges the boys to repeat the Act of Contrition. The emphasis here is on humility, on submitting oneself to a greater power. As the priest speaks the lines of the Act of Contrition, the boys must repeat it after him—an emblem of repeated words, with no originality or creative power.
- Stephen, consumed with a sense of sin and damnation, goes into the city and finds a quiet chapel. He confesses to a sympathetic priest and returns to the college. The chapter ends with the moment of Eucharist, as Stephen is about to receive the host with a cleansed soul. But Stephen is not shown consuming the

host, suggesting that his desired oneness with God may not have truly occurred.

## Stephen's Devotion

- Chapter 4 opens with Stephen in an extremity of piety and devotion. In a heroic effort to make of himself a holy object, each part of his daily life is structured by devotions. Yet even here, in his zeal, Stephen errs: The human creature is holy because it is made in God's image and hallowed by God's grace. We are not able to make ourselves holy; in fact, to think one could is to commit the sin of pride that Stephen thinks he is resisting.
- Throughout this section, Stephen details with an almost masochistic delight his extraordinary degrees of devotion. But Joyce suggests to the reader that he has made a mistake in his conception of God and the spiritual life. He struggles with the most fundamental commandments of Christianity. He is baffled by the love of God and is unable to comprehend the love of neighbor.
- In this condition, Stephen is summoned to meet with the director of the school, who asks Stephen, "Have you ever felt that you had a vocation?" Stephen admits that he has thought of it, and the director describes the condition of being a Jesuit priest, emphasizing pride and power.
  - We might find this a problematic understanding of being a servant of God and the church, but if the priest wants to seduce Stephen to this calling, he knows the right way to do it. Stephen is drawn to this extraordinary power, to what he calls "secret knowledge." It's a version of what attracts him to the artist's life.
  - Yet the priest's vision lacks the very things that Stephen most needs: love of life, love of others. The reality of the priestly life seems to be without life or joy.
  - As he walks again through the Dublin streets, Stephen already knows that the way of the priest is not for him.

## Stephen's True Calling

- Stephen determines to enter University College Dublin. Here, he hopes to encounter the liberating knowledge of the world and experience, not the constraining knowledge of the church or traditional authority.
- Stephen now hears his true calling: to the life of the artist, an alternative creative power to that of God. He wanders to the strand, and in the concluding scene of chapter 4, he watches a girl wading out in the waves. Deeply moved by “the wonder of mortal beauty,” he experiences the profane joy of artistic vision. His vocation now is clear to him: “To live, to err, to fall, to triumph, to recreate life out of life! A wild angel had appeared to him, the angel of mortal youth and beauty, an envoy from the fair courts of life, to throw open before him in an instant of ecstasy the gates of all the ways of error and glory.”
- We can see here the direction of intellectual thought in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, a movement away from bounded constraint and toward unbounded liberation. In this transition from worship of God to worship of art, Stephen becomes emblematic of the modern artist, and the novel becomes almost a guidebook to the modernist quest for liberation.

## Stephen's Artistic Life

- Joyce now plunges us into the longest of the five chapters of the book, during which we see how Stephen will proceed into the artist's life. We also see ominous signs suggesting that his understanding of his vocation might not be entirely successful and, indeed, might not be the same as Joyce's understanding of what the artist needs in order to thrive.
- Chapter 5 opens at the Dedalus house, now a mere cottage enmeshed in the tenements of the north side of Dublin. Stephen flees the house each morning to go to the university, where he faces a range of calls to his talent and his loyalty—nation, family, friendship—each of which he feels he must avoid, just as he has avoided the call of the church.

- One day, Stephen has a conversation with the dean of studies. The dean wants to instruct Stephen on the distinction between the liberal arts and the useful arts, but the conversation ends up focusing on the word *funnel*. Ultimately, the meeting becomes a kind of contest as to who has authority and knowledge over the English language.
  - At the heart of this debate is the English command over Ireland. Stephen reflects: “His language, so familiar and so foreign, will always be for me an acquired speech. I have not made or accepted its words. My voice holds them at bay. My soul frets in the shadow of his language.”
  - There is no more concentrated expression of the Irish struggle with the English language than this, and it lurks throughout the Irish Renaissance: The Irish writer must write in English to reach a world audience, but that means writing in the language of the conqueror and forsaking the native Irish tongue.
- Meanwhile, Stephen is developing a complex theory of aesthetics, drawing on Aristotle, Aquinas, and a mélange of European thinkers. But he confesses that his real interest is in creating art, not theorizing about it.
- Stephen summarizes his aesthetic theories on a walk with his friend Lynch. The main thrust is this: A true work of art is static, isolated, and set apart from the world. Stephen’s idea of the artist is to separate him from the rest of the world, even from his work of art. It is a radically isolating concept.
- Just as Stephen rejects the artist’s need for society, he also rejects the claims of his nation. When the nationalist students try to recruit Stephen for their movement, he rejects them scornfully. Stephen is convinced that the nation, like the church, would consume him; his only commitment is to liberation.

- Yet Joyce signals that Stephen is missing a crucial element in the artist's sympathy. In his final conversation with his one true friend, Cranly, Stephen reveals that he has refused to make his Easter confession in conformance with his mother's wishes. When Cranly asks Stephen, "Do you love your mother?" Stephen responds, "I don't know what your words mean." There is a block to Stephen's emotional life that he cannot get past. Stephen's inability to comprehend mother love, to create poetry, and to see that an artist must be intimately connected to life all suggest that his future as a great poet might be in doubt.
- The novel concludes with Stephen departing Ireland. The last few pages are in diary form, with Stephen perhaps beginning to write his own life story as he finds freedom from Ireland. In the final entries, he offers a statement of his artistic credo that for many will define the urge of modernity: "Welcome, O life! I go to encounter for the millionth time the reality of experience and to forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race ... Old father, old artificer, stand me now and ever in good stead."

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## Supplementary Reading

O'Brien, *James Joyce*.

Thornton, *The Anti-Modernism of Joyce's Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*.

## Questions to Consider

1. Why did Stephen's passionate return to Catholicism not last for him? What ultimately drew him away from the teachings of the church, and what did he choose instead of this doctrine?
2. How do you understand the ending of *Portrait*? Is Stephen launching himself into the artist's world? Or does Joyce suggest that Stephen still faces a hard road in terms of achieving artistic success—indeed, that Stephen may not be adequate to the needs of the artist in the modern world?

# Yeats as the Great 20<sup>th</sup>-Century Poet

**B**y 1910, Yeats had already accomplished an astonishing array of achievements in culture: poetry, plays, essays, public works; in all these areas, Yeats was a significant figure. It is not too much to say that he was the founder and guiding spirit of the Irish Revival, and certainly, without his brilliant and energetic leadership, the revival would not have been nearly the cultural achievement that it was. But then, Yeats found himself restless for a new direction in his poetry, eager to move beyond what he had accomplished and seeking new themes, directions, and standards to guide his work.

### Yeats's Career

- Yeats began his career in the 1890s as the writer of mystic Celticism and Irish Revival poetry. In such memorable poems as “The Stolen Child,” “Fergus and the Druid,” and “To the Rose upon the Rood of Time,” he created poetry that celebrated the Irish mythical past and promulgated a sense of Irish identity and national pride.
- At the same time, Yeats fell into an enduring adoration of Maud Gonne, and this inspired his poems of love and longing. Such poems as “A Woman Homer Sung,” “A Poet to His Beloved,” and many others constitute perhaps the greatest unrequited-love sequence since the Renaissance.
- Then, at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Yeats immersed himself in drama. For years, he devoted the bulk of his energies to the

success of Ireland's national theatre, both by his administrative leadership and by writing his spiritual/symbolic dramas.

- As mentioned, however, by 1910, Yeats was looking for a new direction in his poetry. He was constantly reinventing himself, always moving forward in his art, never settling into a single aesthetic or mode.

## **A New Direction for Yeats**

- Synge's death in 1909 was traumatic for Yeats. It signaled the importance of the artist's life and the small amount of time granted to an artist in which to accomplish his life's work.
  - Yeats had just returned from a tour of northern Italy. In his mind, the Renaissance princes brought together the world of art and the world of politics, creating a kind of ideal harmony for which Yeats would always long.
  - This led Yeats to champion the aristocrat as an ideal ruler, the enlightened one who could unify culture and politics. He hoped such an aristocratic ideal could unify Ireland. This further aligned Yeats with the Protestant Ascendancy and would exacerbate the tensions between Yeats and the Catholic nationalists.
- In 1910, Yeats had little patience with the ardent nationalists. He tended to idealize the two extremes of Irish society: the aristocrats and the peasants. It was the life in between that Yeats almost despised: the emerging middle class and the lower middle class.
- In his poem "September 1913," Yeats gives a bitter description of the middling class, along with a stirring description of the heroic martyrs who had preceded them and with whom Yeats himself wanted to identify.
- This was the attitude that Yeats had to revise in the wake of the Easter 1916 Rising and the heroic sacrifice of the martyrs, who

were all from the lower-middle and middle classes. Thus, in his famous poem on the rising he had to confess that “all changed, changed utterly.”

## Yeats and Ezra Pound

- Another significant event in Yeats’s life in the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was his encounter with the American poet Ezra Pound. Pound was an enormously energetic man, a gifted poet, and a dazzling intellectual. Pound knew that Yeats was the preeminent poet of this period, and he latched onto Yeats both to learn from him and to influence him.
- Pound had a particular idea of what modernist poetry should look like. His famous dictum was “make it new.” He thought that the poetic forms of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century had to break from the past and the constraints of conventional poetry; he wanted poetry that was hard, precise, and pointed. Pound founded the school of *imagism*, which abandoned narrative in poetry and, instead, simply presented a concrete image for the reader to interpret.
- Soon, Pound was advising Yeats on every aspect of his writing. And beginning in the winter of 1913–1914, Yeats and Pound lived together in a remote home in Sussex in the southeast moors of England. They would spend three consecutive winters together until 1916, just before the Easter Rising in Dublin.
- Yeats was in need of some direction for his poetry: He was nearly 49 when he met Pound; one of his closest friends had just died; and his poetic production since his superb 1899 volume *The Wind among the Reeds* had been thin and unspectacular. Pound prodded Yeats in the direction of a more concentrated, precise modernism.
- Spending his summers in Sussex, Yeats was able to focus on his new poetry, to explore his occult interests, and to be relatively aloof from the London and Dublin literary and political circles. Ironically, during Yeats’s period of isolation from the world, the world came insistently calling, first with the outbreak of World War

I, then with the uprising in Dublin. Though Pound tried to show disdain for the world of politics and war, Yeats could not turn away from the spectacle.

- But Yeats's time with Pound was transformative for his poetry. In particular, it reinforced his idea of poetry as a mystical practice, one that set the poet apart in a kind of artistic aristocracy.

### **“The Second Coming”**

- Yeats was emerging as a major modernist poet, growing out of his late-19<sup>th</sup>-century roots into a more powerful, hardened, sweeping poet who could give voice to the age. No poem gives greater expression to this new direction than his lyric “The Second Coming,” written in January 1919.
- This poem captures the apocalyptic mood that followed World War I. Here, Yeats suggests his developing idea that history changes in cataclysm, as one age is destroyed and the next is created, as twin gyres or spirals connect, the one funneling out into destruction, the other funneling into creation. The point where the two gyres meet is the point of cataclysm, which Yeats saw as the condition of his own time.

#### **Excerpt from “The Second Coming”**

by W. B. Yeats

Turning and turning in the widening gyre  
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;  
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;  
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,  
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere  
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;  
The best lack all conviction, while the worst  
Are full of passionate intensity.

- In this poem, Yeats's tone of desperation and the loss of all order conveyed the spirit of Western culture after the horrors of World War I. It also reflected the state of Ireland at this time: The Easter Rising had rolled right into the guerilla War of Independence, and when the poem was published in 1922, the Civil War was raging, making the poem seem all the more appropriate for its age.
- The second half of the poem expresses the hope that this second coming will bring about a new understanding: "Surely some revelation is at hand; / Surely the Second Coming is at hand!" This, of course, is the longed-for otherworldly insight—the thing Yeats sought throughout his entire career. But quickly, this expectation of a revelation of wisdom, comfort, or knowledge is dispelled. Instead of an angel of light and knowledge, Yeats describes a monstrous creature that threatens to overwhelm humanity.

### **Lady Gregory's Influence on Yeats**

- As Yeats progressed in his career to become a major modernist poet, he was involved in one other essential relationship, both to a person and a place: This is Yeats's relationship with Lady Gregory and the 19 consecutive summers he spent at Coole Park, her estate in Galway.
- At Coole Park, Yeats could recover his energies; rest himself; and find tranquility, repose, and focused time for writing. Lady Gregory had Yeats attended to with special care. For her, this was something like taking care of a national treasure. At the same time, she had a genuine affection for Yeats; the two were the closest of friends, as well as colleagues and collaborators.
- Coole Park itself became the setting of some of Yeats's most notable poems. For example, one of his elegies to Robert Gregory, "In Memory of Major Robert Gregory," is set in the newly restored tower of Thoor Ballylee, which Yeats had purchased from the Gregory estate. He imagines settling into the tower at night with his wife and is filled with thoughts of those he has known who have died.

### **“A Coat”**

by W. B. Yeats

I made my song a coat  
Covered with embroideries  
Out of old mythologies  
From heel to throat;  
But the fools caught it,  
Wore it in the world's eyes  
As though they'd wrought it.  
Song, let them take it  
For there's more enterprise  
In walking naked.

- He calls to mind important Irish writers who had influenced him; John Synge, who is never far from Yeats's thought; and his uncle George Pollexfen, who shared Yeats's fascination with the occult.
- Each of these figures Yeats is able to recall, consider, and place in his appropriate sphere of the past. But when he thinks of Robert Gregory, he is unable to find such solace: "I am accustomed to their lack of breath," he states, but he cannot accept "that my dear friend's dear son, / Our Sidney and our perfect man, / Could share in that discourtesy of death."
- Yeats goes on to enumerate all the great gifts that Robert had: love of the Irish landscape; great ability as a horseman; and skill in painting, architecture, and design. He realizes that Robert could combine so many gifts only because his life was meant to be so swift.

- The poem closes in frustration and failure. The point of an elegy is to praise the deceased and to offer some measure of comfort to the grieving. Yet in the final stanza, Yeats must confess that he is insufficient as a poet to accomplish this.
  - Yeats wrote numerous other poems about Coole Park that show how formative this place became for him, but in many ways, the defining Coole Park poem for Yeats was an earlier one, his 1910 poem “Upon a House Shaken by the Land Agitation.”
    - In this poem, we see Yeats proclaiming the life-changing power of Coole Park and, by extension, of Gregory herself. Yeats celebrated Gregory not only as a collaborator and the owner of a house that to Yeats represented the pinnacle of human cultural achievement. What Gregory finally meant to Yeats was a close companion unlike any other he would ever know.
    - In the year before her death, he said that she had been to him “my sole adviser for the greater part of my life, the one person who knew all that I thought and did.” For W. B. Yeats, the greatest poet of the modern age, his achievements were built on what he would call the house of friendship.
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## Supplementary Reading

Foster, *W. B. Yeats: A Life*, vol. II: *The Arch-Poet, 1915–1939*.

Longenbach, *Stone Cottage*.

## Questions to Consider

1. How did Yeats’s attitudes toward Ireland transform in the years from approximately 1910 to 1920? What were some of the key influences—personal, literary, historical—that can account for these transformations? How was his poetry affected by these changes?

2. The relationship between Yeats and Lady Gregory was, in many ways, the central thread of the Irish Renaissance. What did Gregory come to represent for Yeats? How would you describe their relationship?

# Michael Collins and the War of Independence

**F**or Ireland's political identity, Yeats's refrain from "Easter 1916"—"All changed, changed utterly"—was prophetic. After the Easter Rising and the brutal British response of executing 15 of the leaders, Ireland was set on a course that took it far from the accommodationist Home Rule proposals of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. After the rising, Ireland's political leadership became committed to a radical freedom and a republican ideal that still persist today.

## Sinn Fein

- The main political direction up to 1916 was parliamentary pressure on England to grant some form of limited Home Rule to Ireland. That Home Rule was virtually granted in 1914, but World War I interrupted its implementation.
- After the Easter Rising, the Irish Parliamentary Party, led by John Redmond, tried to sustain that direction, as did Lloyd George, the British prime minister, but popular support for Home Rule had vanished. In place of the Parliamentary Party, the new party of the people was Sinn Fein, "We Ourselves," headed by the radical leaders of the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB) and the Irish Volunteers.
- Sinn Fein set out to constitute itself as the legitimate government of an independent Ireland. Sinn Fein declared that the major election of 1918 was, for Ireland, essentially a national referendum on Irish independence: If the Sinn Fein party was placed in power,

its leaders vowed to withdraw from the union with Great Britain and form the Irish Republic.

- Sinn Fein won a stunning 73 seats out of 105. The landslide election both eliminated the Parliamentary Party forever and gave Sinn Fein the mandate to set up an alternative government in Ireland.

## **The Fledgling Irish State**

- Many of the Sinn Fein leaders were veterans of 1916 who had been imprisoned by the British, then released. During their time in prison, they had developed a political and military strategy that would bring the military force of the volunteers into concert with the political direction of Sinn Fein. Two figures who rose to prominence were Michael Collins and Eamon de Valera.
- De Valera became highly regarded in the national consciousness, and he would prove to be one of the most adept political leaders of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He was elected president of the newly formed Irish legislature, Dáil Éireann. This national assembly immediately issued a declaration of independence and a demand that “the English garrison” be expelled from the free Irish republic. The Irish Volunteers became the Irish Republican Army (IRA), now in the service of Dáil Éireann and Sinn Fein.
- Because the Irish republicans did not have time to formulate a theory of government for Ireland, they basically copied British political structures: cabinet, prime minister, ministers of various areas, a British legal system, a British civil service system, and so forth.
- The overwhelming issue was the effort to free the fledgling Irish state from British occupation. In June 1919, de Valera left for the United States to raise awareness (and funds) for the new Irish nation, leaving Collins to fill the leadership vacuum.
- In early 1916, Collins became involved in the preparations for the Easter Rising. He was not one of the central leaders, but his

competence gained respect among the members. In particular, he began to formulate the theory that the key to British control over Ireland lay in its intelligence system and spy network.

- On his release from prison in December 1916, Collins became one of the central inside leaders of Sinn Féin and the IRA. He was elected an MP in the 1918 election, and like all the Sinn Féin MPs, he refused to take his seat in Westminster, joining his colleagues in setting up an alternative government in Dublin.
- Soon, de Valera was named president of the new Irish Republic, and Collins was named minister for finance. Collins secured large loans to allow the government to stay afloat and accomplish its business.
- On the very day that the Dáil Éireann first convened, a group of IRA soldiers attacked two members of the Royal Irish Constabulary (RIC) to capture a load of explosives; the two RIC officers were killed. The War of Independence had begun.

## **The War of Independence**

- With de Valera in America, Collins was named director of intelligence of the IRA. Knowing that the Irish could never match the British army in open combat, Collins waged guerilla warfare and a war of attrition against British power. The IRA was organized into local units that could strike at police barracks, supply depots, large estates, and other targets, then recede into the countryside.
- Regional IRA commanders reported to Collins, who was building a considerable intelligence network throughout the British administration in Ireland. Collins also organized an elite group known only as the Squad, whose purpose was to execute the detectives and spies on whom the British intelligence system depended.
- The most spectacular assault of the Squad occurred in November 1920, when Collins's men executed 14 top British intelligence

officers. The British response was swift, fierce, and in terms of public perception, disastrous. The army auxiliaries entered Croke Park in Dublin, apparently searching for IRA operatives, but they opened fire on the crowd, killing 14 people. Such reprisals further ignited the population against the British occupation.

- The actions taken by the British were disastrous, and their difficult situation was exacerbated by the fact that they could gather little reliable information about the rebels and could not find or engage them in open combat. The IRA especially targeted the rural RIC barracks. Because the British did not deploy the army directly into the populace, the RIC had the responsibility for suppressing insurgencies. Most members of the RIC were Irish Catholics, who could be encouraged to resign by the IRA.
- By the winter of 1919–1920, the RIC had essentially lost control of much of the countryside, especially in remote areas of the southwest and northwest. It was forced to remain inside urban barracks, basically an occupying force that was itself besieged by a hostile populace and an armed enemy.
- In response to this situation, the British decided the RIC needed to be reinforced, motorized, and expanded; they recruited mercenary auxiliaries from England and brought them to Ireland.
  - The new recruits were outfitted in the dark green pants of the RIC and the khaki jackets of the British military, earning them the nickname Black and Tans. They soon became the most hated occupants of Ireland.
  - Poorly trained, essentially trapped in a hostile country, and facing deadly attacks on a regular basis, the Black and Tans became a brutal and terrifying presence in Ireland.

## **Return of de Valera**

- In late 1920, de Valera returned to Ireland. He found, to his consternation, that Collins now controlled the IRA and had taken



Eamon de Valera

over as acting president. De Valera felt threatened. He also was convinced that the hit-and-run guerilla tactics were not putting Ireland in the best light on the world stage. He wanted a regular, legitimate army to confront the British as equals.

- De Valera determined that the IRA would attack the Custom House in Dublin, the heart of British commercial trade, in a battle that would show the world that Ireland was a legitimate nation. The IRA lost more than 100 men in the battle, yet it further confirmed that there was no British control over the country and that Sinn Fein had the faith of the people.

- British countermeasures improved as they began to discover and destroy pockets of rebel resistance. Collins gave de Valera the impression that they could keep up the war for several more months, but in fact, he knew that the IRA could hold out only for a few more weeks.
- At the same time, in the North, in Ulster, the loyalists had succeeded in establishing the first Northern Ireland parliament. The unionists had used the last Home Rule bill and its resultant Government of Ireland Act to establish a six-county government. The new domain of Northern Ireland was a committed part of the British Empire.
- When Great Britain and the Free State of Ireland struck a treaty in 1922, Northern Ireland was given the option to remain as it had constituted itself, which is exactly what the North did. Significant civil strife ensued, with an enraged and terrified Catholic populace in Ulster pushing back.
- By 1922, conditions were in place for the Northern Ireland crisis that would simmer throughout the century and boil over in 1969: a Protestant majority insistent on maintaining its hold on power; a Catholic minority that was excluded from government, employment, and policing; and both sides essentially desiring the elimination of the other.
- In the South, Lloyd George and de Valera agreed to a truce and to open negotiations for a new political arrangement between Great Britain and the majority of Ireland. Although de Valera had developed a potentially brilliant theory of an external association between Ireland and England, he did not attend the negotiations; instead, he sent a team led by Arthur Griffith and Collins.
- The key issues in the negotiations had to do with the nature of the emerging Irish state and the connection it would retain to the British Empire. London offered dominion status to Ireland; the

Irish held out for de Valera's external association, but this was unacceptable to the British.

- The eventual agreement created the Irish Free State, which would be self-governing and essentially independent in all domestic affairs. It also mandated that most British military forces would withdraw from Ireland. And it affirmed that a boundary commission would work to resolve the border between the Irish Free State and Northern Ireland.
- Griffith and Collins finally accepted the partition of the North because they felt that eventually, this six-county statelet would be economically impossible to sustain. But British military and economic might would enable Northern Ireland to thrive for nearly a century.
- Collins insisted that the treaty, while unpalatable and disappointing, was a stepping stone to full independence. He knew that eventually, Ireland could establish its independence through its own political processes, which in fact, is what would happen in 1937, when the Irish Free State approved its new constitution and changed its official name to Ireland.
- But to republican diehards, the treaty was a betrayal. Collins prophetically said on signing the treaty that he had signed his own death warrant. He would return to an Ireland that was now free, although only conditionally so, and where a number of his former comrades considered themselves his enemies—certainly, enemies to the treaty he had brought home. The Irish Civil War was about to begin.

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## Supplementary Reading

Dwyer, *Big Fellow, Long Fellow*.

———, *The Squad and the Intelligence Operations of Michael Collins*.

## Questions to Consider

1. What characteristics of personality made it possible for Michael Collins to emerge as such a central force in Irish history following the 1916 rising? How did Collins shape the Irish strategy in the War of Independence?
2. How would you evaluate the treaty agreed to between Ireland and Great Britain at the end of the War of Independence? Can you imagine any other sort of conclusion to that conflict?

# The Irish Civil War

The treaty that brought the Anglo-Irish War to an end encompassed three major elements that were virtually unacceptable to hardline republicans. First, Ireland was granted dominion status within the British Commonwealth. Second, the members of the new Irish Parliament would have to swear an oath of fidelity to the British Crown. And third, the treaty left the North of Ireland partitioned off from the rest of the country. Before the treaty was even signed, there was already state-sponsored violence against Catholics in the North, and it seemed as if an effectively apartheid state would be established there. To many republicans, this seemed a mockery of the ideal republic for which they and their comrades had fought and died.

### A Stepping Stone to Freedom

- Michael Collins made the case as clearly and forcefully as he could that the treaty ending the Anglo-Irish War was a stepping stone to freedom. With it, he said, the Irish could eventually put in place whatever political processes and definitions they wished.
- The Irish political leadership split over the treaty. Collins and Griffith felt that it was the best outcome that could have been attained. But Eamon de Valera and his supporters rejected the treaty and were outraged that Collins had agreed to the terms without first consulting with the other leaders in Dublin. Collins maintained that de Valera knew a compromise would be required and had sent Collins to negotiate to keep himself free from the taint of such compromise.

- The treaty was presented to the Dáil for a vote on January 7, 1922. The debate was fierce, but the treaty was approved by a vote of 64 to 57. De Valera promptly resigned as president of the Irish Republic, which in effect had ceased to exist; the treaty's ratification put in place the Provisional Government of the Free State of Ireland.
- De Valera argued that by approving the treaty, the Dáil had betrayed its oath to the Irish Republic. He actually had a compromise solution, in which Ireland would have what he termed an external association with Great Britain, rather than the status of member of the commonwealth that the treaty mandated. But the treaty had been approved by the Parliament, and there was little room for additional changes now.
- Many IRA officers opposed the treaty. A group of officers gathered in March and agreed with de Valera that the Dáil had no authority to support a treaty that rejected (at least for the present) the ideal of the republic. But a month later, Richard Mulcahy, the minister of defence, claimed that army delegates had voted to accept the treaty.
- The army then basically split: The anti-treaty faction formed its own Executive, which claimed to be the government of the country; the pro-treaty faction described these seceding volunteers as illegals.
- De Valera embarked on a speaking tour to try to sway the people to reject the treaty and warning of the civil war that was to come. Collins, meanwhile, was desperate to avoid civil war: He avidly pursued an army reunification effort, and he put in place a plan for the Free State's first general election, to be held in June 1922. Because the British insisted that all conditions of the treaty be implemented, Collins was restricted in the sorts of political compromises he could offer.
- The election was decisive in favor of the treaty. The bulk of the Irish people were weary of warfare and saw the treaty in much the

way that Collins described it: a positive move toward eventual Irish freedom. But de Valera and his hardline followers were resolute and rejected the legitimacy of the election.

## The Civil War

- Collins now formed the Free State Army out of the IRA forces that were committed to the treaty and the expressed will of the people. Meanwhile, the anti-treaty IRA forces took the opportunity to capture arms and prepare their forces for conflict. That conflict was initiated on April 14, 1922, when anti-treaty forces took over the Four Courts in Dublin.

The Four Courts is a huge domed structure that housed the courts of law; it was taken by anti-treaty forces in April of 1922.



- During this time, the British military officer who was the main security advisor to the Northern Ireland government was assassinated in England for his actions in oppressing the Catholic minority in the North—an action that may well have been ordered by Collins. But Churchill was convinced that the anti-treaty hardliners had committed the act, and he told Collins that unless he could gain control over the situation in Dublin, the British army would attack the Four Courts.
  
- Finally, Collins ordered the bombardment of the Four Courts rebels, and on June 28, the Civil War in Ireland began in earnest. After two days' bombardment, the Free State troops stormed the building and the rebels surrendered.
  
- The complexity of this conflict can be seen in the figure of Cathal Brugha. Brugha was one of de Valera's key supporters, a veteran of the rising who had subsequently been chief of staff of the IRA during the War of Independence. He had held a higher military rank than Collins, but Collins was a more influential leader and strategist, and his daring squad of assassins had been decisive in carrying the War of Independence to its eventual truce.
  - Brugha was deeply opposed to Collins, but he was also opposed to taking up arms against the newly formed Free State Army—his former comrades in the struggle against England. He urged the rebels who had occupied the Four Courts to withdraw.
  
  - When they refused, he decided that the best way to help them would be to occupy another part of Dublin, the area around O'Connell Street near the GPO. He hoped that this “second front” would ease pressure on the Four Courts and compel Collins and the Free State forces to negotiate.
  
  - Instead, the Free State forces shelled the rebel positions, and the O'Connell Street buildings caught fire. Most of the irregulars (the anti-treaty faction) were able to escape, but

Brugha remained with a small detachment. He ordered his men to surrender on July 5, but he himself refused to do so. He charged the Free State troops armed only with his revolver and was fatally shot, dying two days later.

- The Irish Civil War lasted less than a year; the irregulars formally surrendered on May 24, 1923, about 11 months after the Four Courts battle commenced. It began as a public battle between the Free State forces and the anti-treaty or irregular forces; soon, it turned into a fierce guerilla war waged by the irregulars, resorting to the same tactics they had used against the British a year before.
- At first, the irregulars had a nearly two-to-one advantage in troops, including many of the veterans of the War of Independence. But soon, the irregulars were outnumbered and outgunned, and they resorted to bank robbery to get money to support their troops and obtain weapons and ammunition. The conflict quickly devolved into a terrible sequence of assassinations and reprisals.
- Several towns in the southwest were recaptured from the rebels, and by the end of the summer of 1922, the Free State controlled the urban centers and much of the countryside. The rebels responded with surprise attacks and guerrilla strikes, inflicting heavy casualties and seriously threatening the stability of the Free State government.
- In the midst of this period, the Free State president, Griffith, suddenly died from a brain hemorrhage, and W. T. Cosgrave assumed the office. Just 10 days later, Collins was killed in an ambush in his native county of Cork. His loss was incalculable to Ireland.
- The death of Collins embittered the Free State forces further against the rebels and fueled the atrocities on both sides. Richard Mulcahy assumed the role of commander of the Free State army and secured an Emergency Powers Act from the Dáil, enabling him to order executions of prominent rebel leaders.

- The irregulars lacked any legitimate or effective government and had no structure or even area of geographic control. The general population did not support their efforts, and the Catholic Church had condemned their actions. By spring 1923, the futility of further struggle was clear, and de Valera called on the military leaders to enact a ceasefire, but they refused.
- In April, Liam Lynch, director of military operations for the irregulars, was killed in the mountains of Tipperary, and a number of other anti-treaty leaders were captured. Frank Aiken assumed leadership of the irregulars and declared a ceasefire on April 30. A month later, on May 24, de Valera issued a statement asserting, “Military victory must be allowed to rest for the moment with those who have destroyed the Republic.” This continued the stance of defiance and seemed to augur further conflict in the future.

### **Aftermath of the War**

- In August 1923, the Free State called another general election, and the Free State party, now named Cumann na nGaedheal, or “Society of the Gaels,” won with about 40 percent of the vote. More than 13,000 anti-treaty soldiers and supporters were imprisoned at the time of the election, yet the anti-treaty side received 27 percent of the vote. In the autumn, the prisoners went on hunger strikes.
- The Civil War claimed perhaps 4,000 lives, though exact casualties have never been counted. The economic cost of the war was perhaps as high as 50 million pounds, and it left the fledgling Irish state economically crippled. The year after the war, 1924, Ireland was unable to pay the debt it owed to Great Britain in accordance with the treaty. England agreed to forgive the debt in exchange for Ireland accepting the boundary of Northern Ireland. That boundary remains in place to this day.
- The legacy of bitterness and recrimination lasted the entire century. Ireland’s two major political parties throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century derived from the two sides of the Civil War: Fine Gael, the “tribe of the Gaels,” arose from the pro-treaty Cumann na nGaedheal party,

while Fianna Fáil, the “warriors of the Fianna,” was the party de Valera formed in 1927, when he reentered formal politics.

- In the greatest of ironies, de Valera was able to come to power in 1932, when Fianna Fáil won the majority in the election. Indeed, throughout the 1930s, Fianna Fáil resolved all the areas of objection to the treaty: removing the oath of fidelity, writing a new constitution with no recognition of the British Crown, and laying claim to the whole of Ireland. The stepping stone to freedom that Collins had predicted was exactly what de Valera accomplished.

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## Supplementary Reading

Dwyer, *Michael Collins and the Civil War*.

Hopkinson, *Green against Green*.

## Questions to Consider

1. What were the arguments in favor of rejecting the treaty ending the Anglo-Irish War? What do you make of de Valera's position on the treaty and its negotiations?
2. Why did the Civil War lead to such atrocities and fierce reprisals? How can we account for this? Is this a logical development from Irish history?

## *Ulysses*: A Greek Epic in an Irish World

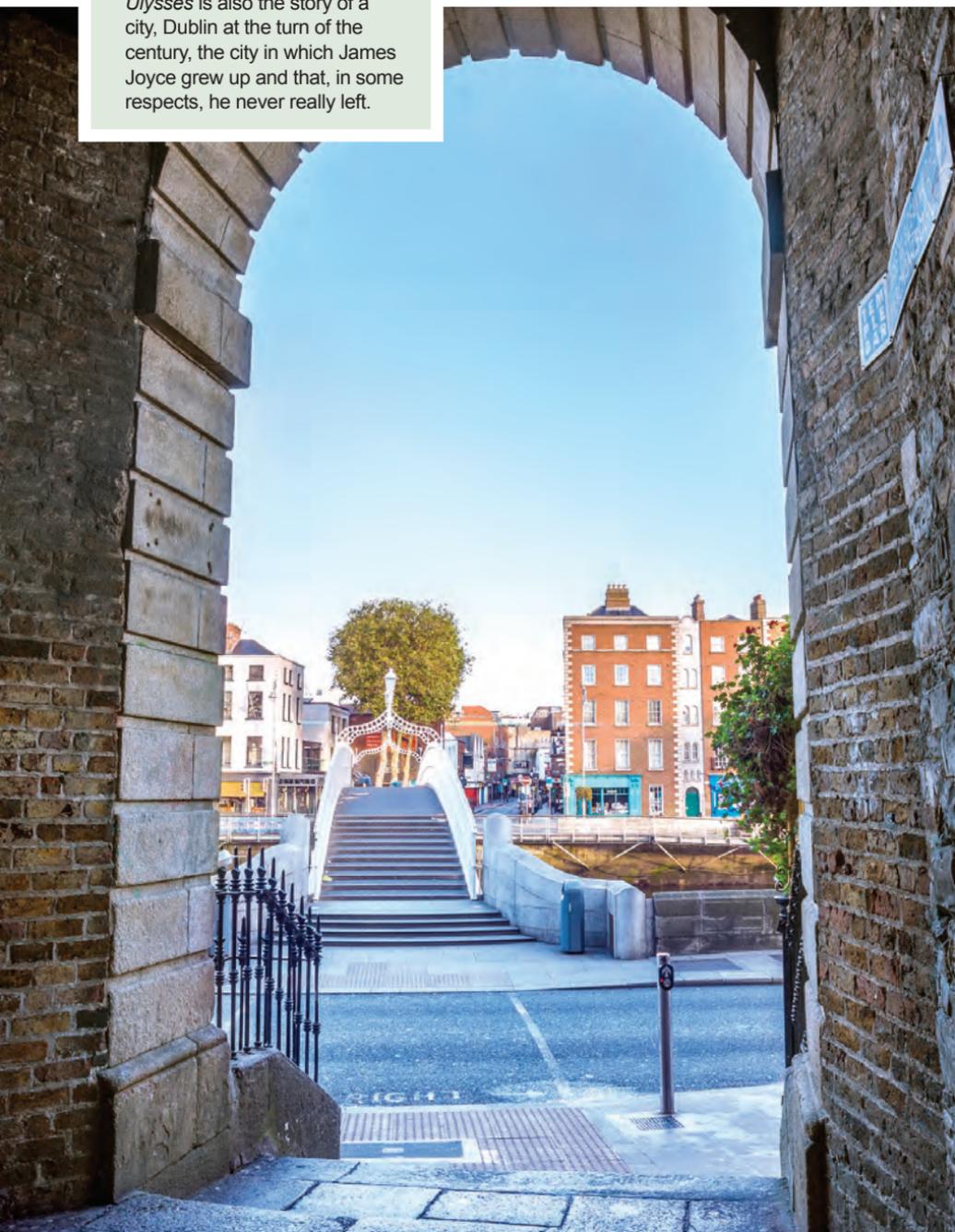
When we think of James Joyce's monumental novel, *Ulysses*, what comes to mind? Most would say a work of notorious difficulty, having some sort of relation to Homer's *Odyssey*. However, it is also among the most moving, most intimate, and most profoundly human of epics. Beyond the complexity, the technique, and the difficulty, is a timeless story of a man and a woman, a young man encountering the world, and the issues we all face: love, loss, doubt, passion, and uncertainty over our most fundamental relationships to one another, to our nation, and to God.

### Background on *Ulysses*

- James Joyce wrote *Ulysses* between 1914 and 1921. During most of its composition, wars were raging all around him: World War I, the Easter Rising, and the Irish War of Independence. Joyce saw the pacifistic ethos of his work as an alternative to the carnage taking place in the world.
- The book is set in a single day, from the morning of June 16, 1904, to the early hours of June 17. It has three main characters: First, there are Leopold and Molly Bloom, a couple married for 16 years, who have a teenage daughter and who lost their only son, Rudy, in infancy 10 years before. Since that loss, they have not made love. The third character is Stephen Dedalus, the same person from Joyce's *Portrait*. In this book, Stephen is in mourning for the death of his mother and has been unable to fulfill the artistic promises of his youth.

- On the morning of June 16, Leopold leaves the house for work; he has many encounters throughout the day. Eventually, he meets up with Stephen, who also has wandered far in Dublin. As the night goes on, the two return to the Bloom house; eventually, Stephen leaves, and Leopold and Molly end the book lying in bed together.
- These three characters align with the central figures in Homer's *Odyssey*: Odysseus, the questing hero; Penelope, his faithful wife; and Telemachus, the son seeking his father. Joyce worked assiduously to parallel every element of his book with details in the *Odyssey*. Yet Joyce's book is also different from Homer's epic.
  - For example, Leopold Bloom, Joyce's 20<sup>th</sup>-century Odysseus, is no seafaring warrior-hero. He sells advertisements, going to various businesses and trying to place their ads in local Dublin newspapers. He walks all over Dublin on this day, mimicking Odysseus's epic journey, yet he seemingly goes nowhere.
  - The faithful Penelope is Molly Bloom, who spends the day preparing for a sexual liaison with another man, and while Leopold is out, the rendezvous occurs. Joyce may be saying that in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, we can offer only pale imitations of epic heroism.
  - Yet in many respects, Bloom is every bit as heroic as Homer's Odysseus. He is charitable; he exhibits selflessness; and he is patient, kind, and merciful. At the same time, Bloom is Jewish, an upholder, to some extent, of the Mosaic Law and an archetypal exile. He is even loving toward the wife he knows will betray him that day; he understands that Molly is longing for the physical passion that he cannot give to her.
  - And even Molly, despite her affair, affirms Bloom at the end, approving his manhood over that of his rival and, in a sense, reasserting her faithfulness to him. This is a new concept of heroism: not the traditional heroism of martial prowess; Joyce had seen that heroism lead to slaughter in the trenches. The

*Ulysses* is also the story of a city, Dublin at the turn of the century, the city in which James Joyce grew up and that, in some respects, he never really left.



heroism needed for the modern world can be found in the virtues Bloom exhibits.

- *Ulysses* is also the story of Dublin at the turn of the century, yet its reach is universal. Joyce's Dublin is any town, just as Leopold Bloom becomes everyman. In Joyce's famous "mythic method," he writes about the specific with such clarity and effectiveness that his characters transcend their time and place and stand for all people in all times and places.

## Structure and Style of *Ulysses*

- *Ulysses* consists of 18 episodes, each of which takes its title from an event or figure in Homer's *Odyssey*.
  - The first three episodes focus on Stephen Dedalus. They're titled "Telemachus," named for Odysseus's son; "Nestor," named for the mentor figure in the *Odyssey*; and "Proteus," named for the shape-shifting god.
  - The next three focus on Leopold and Molly: "Calypso," named for the seducing goddess; "Lotus-Eaters," after the narcotic plants that afflict Odysseus; and "Hades," the voyage to the underworld.
- These first six episodes are written in what scholars term the *initial style of Ulysses*: It's fairly consistent, told from the third-person point of view but with the narration often shifting to the internal monologue. *Internal monologue* is also called *stream of consciousness*. In this style, it's as if we see how our thoughts flow from one to another, jumping about without apparent cause, then making connections we did not even know were present.
  - We see this style in the first pages of the book, as Stephen watches a milk woman. First, he thinks of the old milk woman as a messenger; he imagines her in the field, milking the cows; then he thinks of her as a representative of Ireland itself; and he upbraids her—that is, Ireland—for serving one of his

companions, an Englishman (“her conqueror”). This interior monologue style allows for far more meaning to emerge.

- Another instructive example of this style occurs in the fifth episode, when Bloom sits in a Catholic church—feeling an outsider given his Jewish heritage—and reflects on the meaning of the mass and its rituals. Here, we see the dramatic differences between Stephen’s and Bloom’s thought. Compared to Stephen, Bloom is far less philosophical, far less removed from the daily doings and feelings of most men and women.
- The seventh episode is titled “Aeolus,” named for the god of winds in the *Odyssey*. This episode is set in the newspaper offices, and the title shows Joyce’s scorn for journalism, which he saw as a debased, purely commercial form of writing. This episode consists of 62 sections, each of which is set off with a headline, like a newspaper column.
- The eighth episode, “Lestrygonians,” focuses on the lunch hour, drawing its title from the cannibal tribe that nearly wipes out Odysseus’s men. The style reverts to that of the initial six episodes.
- Beginning with the ninth episode and running to the end of the book, every episode has a style that is different from all the others and, in many cases, different from anything that had been attempted in English prose before.
  - The ninth episode, “Scylla and Charybdis,” has the form of a dramatic play; the tenth episode, “Wandering Rocks,” weaves through 19 brief sections set throughout Dublin, meandering from one character to another, much like the wandering rocks that beset Odysseus on his journey home.
  - The eleventh episode, “Sirens,” follows a complex prelude-and-fugue style, reflecting the episode’s emphasis on music and the seducing song of the Sirens from the *Odyssey*.

- The twelfth episode takes its title from the Cyclops, the terrifying one-eyed giant; thus, its style is one of *gigantism*, or absurd inflation of the prose. The thirteenth is named for Nausicaa, the young princess who aids Odysseus and, in Joyce's book, is characterized in a teenage girl whose imagination is built from romance novels; its style is one of nostalgic, sentimental, and "gushy" romantic writing.
- The fourteenth episode, "The Oxen of the Sun," is perhaps the most difficult of all the episodes to read. The Oxen of the Sun were the sacred oxen that Odysseus's men slaughter, leading to a final destruction that only Odysseus survives. Joyce represents this theme of sacred fertility by setting the episode in a birthing hospital and writing it in imitation of every kind of prose fiction in English, from 7<sup>th</sup>- and 8<sup>th</sup>-century Anglo-Saxon chronicles to late-19<sup>th</sup>-century American dialect. The style is that of gestation, development, and birth, told through the development of the English language itself.
- These first 14 episodes were written between 1914 and early 1919, when Joyce was living in Trieste and Zurich. Then, he moved to Paris and, in the ensuing two years, wrote the final four episodes.
  - The last four chapters show Stephen and Bloom coming together in the nightmarish "Circe" episode; they wander back to Bloom's home in the "Eumaeus" episode; and they converse in a catechism style in the "Ithaca" episode, at the end of which they part.
  - In the final "Penelope" chapter, Joyce tells the entire story from the perspective and voice of Molly Bloom. It's an astonishing compilation, exceeding the scope of any novel before this one and creating a new form of literature, the modern prose epic.
- Joyce created a schema for each chapter that reveals the depth of the parallels to the *Odyssey* that he had in mind and shows

the layers of detail and structure that he forged into the writing of *Ulysses*. These structures—title, scene, hour, organ, art, color, symbol, and more—are written into every episode. The book is less like traditional fiction and more like a complex symphony or a modernist work of architecture.

## Themes and Motifs in *Ulysses*

- It's important to note that for all of his complexity, Joyce was telling a compelling story. In 1917, he explained to one of his students what drew him to the *Odyssey*: “The most beautiful, most human traits are contained in the *Odyssey*.”
- Joyce admired Odysseus as the father figure, the man who values family and home over conquest and bloodshed, and as “the man of many devices.” *Ulysses* is a portrait of an artist, too, though not the angst-ridden, romantic artist portrayed in *Portrait*; *Ulysses* shows the mature artist, the one who assembles, builds, and finds new solutions that none had seen before. Joyce further singles out the great themes of the *Odyssey*: the motif of wandering and the homecoming with which the *Odyssey* concludes.
- It is essential to note that for Joyce, *Ulysses* is also a distinctively Irish epic. He saw in the story of Odysseus something peculiarly relevant for his own people and his own nation. In *The Irish Ulysses*, the scholar Maria Tymoczko outlines all the ways in which Joyce involves Irish history and culture in his epic: the use of Irish myth, Irish oral traditions, early Irish literature, Irish sacred writing, Irish legend, and Irish concepts of the otherworld.
- Joyce was often scornful of the Irish Revival movement, yet like all great satirists, he mocked the very thing he held most dear. Irishness to Joyce was his essential identity, and one reason he always returned to Ireland in his imagination was that it was with this country and these people that he most fervently identified.

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## Supplementary Reading

Homer, *The Odyssey*.

Joyce, *Ulysses*.

## Questions to Consider

1. How is Joyce's *Ulysses* both analogous to, and different from, Homer's *Odyssey*? In particular, how do Joyce's three main characters—Leopold, Molly, and Stephen—compare to their famous counterparts in Homer's epic?
2. In what ways does the style of *Ulysses*—that is, the actual mode of writing of each of its 18 episodes—become, in a sense, the very subject of the book?

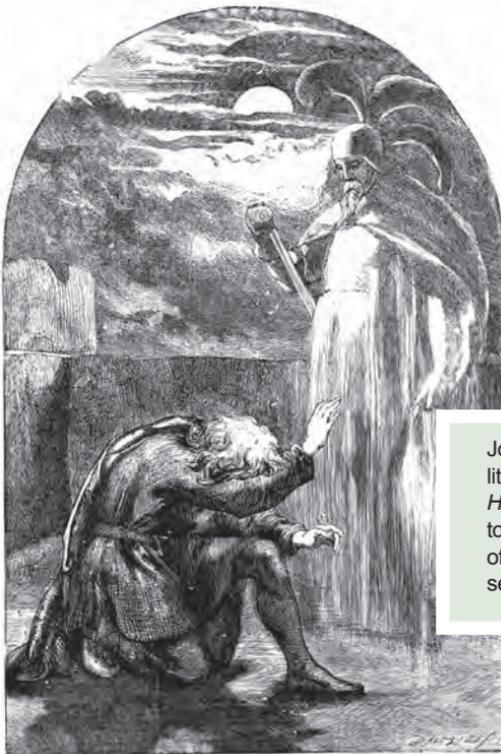
## Three Episodes from *Ulysses*

As generations of readers have noted, *Ulysses* is a difficult book to read. The technique, the language, the voices, the complex structures, Joyce's elaborate architectonics of fiction—these make for a dense, challenging, thickly wrought narrative. How can we unpack and begin to understand *Ulysses*? The best approach is to start with a single element and work one's way outward. In this lecture, we'll look at three episodes—"Hades," "Nausicaa," and "Circe"—and see how we can understand the whole by seeing more thoroughly into these parts. By looking into these episodes with care, we can learn much about Joyce's vision and achievement in *Ulysses* and how this book forms a crucial part of the Irish identity.

### "Hades"

- "Hades" tells the story of Leopold Bloom and a handful of other men journeying to a cemetery on the north side of Dublin for the funeral of their friend, Paddy Dignam.
  - The first part of the episode consists of their journey to the cemetery. This represents one of the major themes of the book: that every character is on a passage that will ultimately end in the grave.
  - The episode, like the funeral, is a *memento mori*, a reminder of the inevitability of death. And much of the drama and power of the episode consists in the ways in which Bloom offers a counter to the death drive by speaking for the power of life.

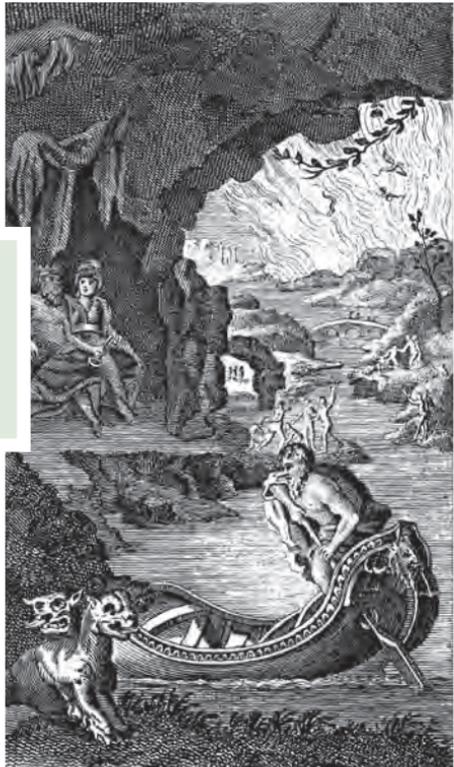
- One of the travelers with Bloom is Simon Dedalus, the father of Stephen, and as they begin their journey, Bloom sees Stephen walking along the street. Bloom observes Simon talk about his son, and he reflects on the importance of sons. We learn about the death of Bloom's own son, Rudy, only gradually, in bits and pieces.
- Part of Bloom's quest on this day is to be reunited with the son he has lost; Stephen stands as the substitute son who could make up for the loss of Rudy. Similarly, Stephen is seeking a more adequate father/guide than Simon, and Bloom could fill that role. Bloom is the Odysseus figure, searching to be reunited with his lost son, and Stephen takes the role of Telemachus, longing to have the absent father restored to him.



Joyce uses a range of literary allusions, from *Hamlet* to the Bible, to reinforce the theme of the father and son seeking to be reunited.

- Through Bloom's self-reflection, we learn that his own father committed suicide. This adds another layer to both the father/son theme and the death theme. The passing of another hearse, this one carrying the small coffin of a baby, prompts Bloom's further reflections on the death of Rudy.
- The journey in the carriage is meant to echo Odysseus's journey to the underworld in the *Odyssey*. Odysseus journeys there to speak with the dead and gain the wisdom he needs to find his way home. As the "Hades" episode continues, we see that Bloom's journey will work in the same way.

In the "Hades" episode, Bloom's journey parallels that of Odysseus, who visits the underworld to gain the wisdom he needs to get home.



- Bloom reflects on dying, death, the state of being buried, and the putrefaction of corpses. In addition to Bloom's reflection, this is Joyce speaking to his readers: You, too, will be as dead as these people are now. Bloom's reflection on the state of the dead is gruesome, but note his quasi-scientific mind at work: "Of course the cells or whatever they go on living." This is Bloom's response to the omnipresent fact of death: Life will continue; life, not death, is the final word.

- At the episode's end, after Dignam is buried and the men are preparing to leave, Bloom shifts decisively away from the power of death, turning to embrace life with thoughts of Molly.

## “Nausicaa”

- The “Nausicaa” episode corresponds to the part of Homer’s epic in which Odysseus is shipwrecked, alone and exhausted, on the island of the Phaeacians. The daughter of the king, Nausicaa, discovers him on the beach and helps him on his journey homeward. In this episode, the teenage girl Gerty MacDowell functions as the Nausicaa figure.
- To evoke the consciousness of Gerty, Joyce uses the writing style of late Victorian women’s magazines, sentimental novels, and advertisements that would fill the mind of such a girl. The brilliance of this episode consists in how well Joyce masters this sentimental voice; it is not overdone, and it is not wholly mocking. There is a respect for Gerty’s world, even if the sorts of novels with which it is peopled are different from Joyce’s modernist aesthetic.
- As Bloom observes Gerty, she constructs an elaborate series of fantasies about him and about her own life. As the episode unfolds, it becomes clear that Bloom is aroused while watching Gerty, and she is aware of his gaze on her; she willingly folds him into her fantasies and participates in an erotic exchange with him.
- In the midst of this mélange of sentiment, advertising, and romance, Joyce reveals some of Gerty’s very real and difficult plight. We learn that her father is an alcoholic, and it’s suggested that he is abusive. Finally, as she departs the strand, we see that she is lame, having been crippled in a sledding accident as a child.
- Beneath all this is Joyce’s sympathetic understanding that a young, lower-middle-class woman of Dublin has few opportunities for happiness or fulfillment: Employment possibilities are limited, personal expression is nearly impossible, and the one avenue

for social fulfillment—marriage—ends more often than not in a loveless relationship that may be characterized by drink or abuse.

- Bloom, meanwhile, has watched Gerty from a slight distance on the strand; aware of his arousal, she leans further back, revealing more of her legs and undergarments. As Bloom observes her, he masturbates to a climax that is shared by Gerty.
- We then shift to Bloom's perspective, which is a bit jarring because Bloom thinks of Gerty as a sexual creature but shorn of her gentle sentiment and romance. Indeed, Joyce mistrusted romanticism precisely because he knew it was so far from our lived reality. Bloom is an empiricist, one who depends on his senses and on the reality that the world provides.
- Yet we soon see that Bloom, too, sympathizes with and understands this young girl. He knows that she knew what was happening the whole time, and he knows the likely fate that awaits her and most young women of the world.
- As he muses on what has passed between him and Gerty, Bloom is struck by the knowledge that Molly and her lover, Boylan, might have been having sex at the very moment that Bloom and Gerty were having their communion. We begin to see that his time with Gerty is a sort of recompense for Bloom.
- Bloom then recalls that when he and Molly were courting, they shared their first sexual experience near this spot on the beach. Now, those memories return to him, in the light of all that has happened since: Rudy's death, their 10 years of abstinence, and Molly's affair.
  - He thinks of returning with her to the beach but rejects the idea. Yet in another, less literal, sense he already has returned: "So it returns. Think you're escaping and run into yourself. Longest way round is the shortest way home."

- That, of course, is the meaning of Bloom's journey in this book: He takes a long, circuitous, uncertain route, but it's the only way to bring himself and Molly home.

## “Circe”

- “Circe” is set around midnight, and it refers to the part of the *Odyssey* in which Odysseus and his men are imprisoned and enchanted by Circe, who transforms his men into swine. Joyce sets this episode in the Nighttown area of Dublin, the red-light district, where the brothels were located.
- Joyce wanted a style that would combine the world of nightmare and hallucination with the world of fantasy, desire, and outlawed sexuality. He renders the episode like a drama, with elaborate stage directions, settings, and structured character speech. Then, he carefully interweaves essentially realistic dialogue and exchanges with clearly fantastic, hallucinatory events. Often, it is difficult to tell what is real and what is hallucination. “Circe” represents the most obviously modernist and experimental style of the book.
- As Bloom searches through Nighttown for Stephen, who is drunk and has been abandoned by his companions, his fantasies begin to emerge in the pressurized atmosphere of the brothels. He imagines himself accused of various wrongdoings, including plagiarism, the seduction of virtuous women, and disloyalty to the empire.
  - We see here Bloom's sense of persecution, his outsider status, always suspected and accused in Dublin society, as well as his own self-accusation. This increases as his fantasies grow into more elaborate sexual dramas, with Bloom exhibiting voyeurism and masochism, desiring to be punished for his wrongdoings and sexual failures.
  - Increasingly, his fantasies turn toward Molly, always the lodestone in Bloom's consciousness. We see that in some

sense, Bloom blames himself not only for Rudy's death but for the failure of love between him and Molly and even for the fact that Molly has turned to another man. Essentially, he desires punishment for these failings, a punishment that he wishes Molly herself would administer.

- Yet the drama of this episode consists in Bloom persistently watching over and protecting Stephen. Stephen is tormented by guilt toward his mother, at whose dying bed he refused to kneel and pray. In the climactic moment of "Circe," he sees his mother's ghost coming toward him. He imagines her reminding him of his own mortality, then asks her the question that has haunted him throughout the book: "Tell me the word, mother, if you know now. The word known to all men." The word, of course, is love, but Stephen does not comprehend this word, nor does he know what it means to love and be loved.
- This, in fact, is what has constricted him as a poet: His solipsistic, narcissistic, and self-consuming approach to the world cuts him off from the flow of men and women; he needs to learn the lesson of Bloom, the fellow-feeling, compassion, and charity that will put Stephen in touch with life, rather than set him apart from life.
- The closing tableau of the episode shows Bloom tending to the now passed-out Stephen, a father caring for his fallen son. In that moment, Bloom has his final hallucination, or vision, of Rudy restored to life as he might have been. The boy is reading his book as a white lamb peeps out of his pocket, part Christ child, part fairy child. It's as if Bloom is vouchsafed this enchanting image of his dead son to connote that he can now assume a fatherly role to Stephen, his adopted son. With this image suggesting reconciliation and paternal love, the nightmare of "Circe" comes to an end.

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## Supplementary Reading

Blamires, *The New Bloomsday Book*.

Gifford, *Ulysses Annotated*.

## Questions to Consider

1. How does the father-son relationship between Leopold Bloom and Stephen Dedalus develop over the course of *Ulysses*? What larger meanings are involved in this relationship for Joyce—biographically, philosophically, and psychologically?
2. Repeatedly in *Ulysses* we see the principle of life overcoming the principle of death. In what ways do these three episodes reinforce that fundamental opposition of the book?

# Molly Bloom: Joyce's Voice of Love

In the last lecture, we focused on Joyce's two male characters in *Ulysses*, Stephen Dedalus and Leopold Bloom, and looked at Molly Bloom primarily in relation to these characters. Molly's activities throughout the day are hinted at, especially her affair with Blazes Boylan, and her key roles are suggested, especially her archetypal feminine roles of wife, mother, and lover. In Joyce's narrative, too, Molly is always central, though rarely center stage. In "Penelope," however, Joyce focuses exclusively on Molly's actions and chooses to tell the story exclusively through her voice and consciousness. At the end of *Bloomsday*, the story, language, and perspective are given over entirely to Molly; she has, quite literally, the last word of *Ulysses*.

## Molly's Language

- Molly's first burst of language continues for 245 lines, then there's a paragraph break, followed by another 250-line burst. These are not quite paragraphs, not quite sentences, but neither are they rambling or run-on expressions; rather, we follow the flows of Molly's consciousness and see how she makes connections among persons, events, and memories.
- Molly's language is essentially independent of punctuation, with the exception of two periods, and this reflects the overall freedom of her mind and her voice. Punctuation is the order we impose on the otherwise unending flow of language; Molly's language accepts no outside order. This is also true of Molly herself. Freedom, vitality, and the flow of life are key elements in her character.

- Through her language, Molly gives us her views on the long day that we have just experienced. These views are often at odds with one another, but this does not trouble Molly. Her views on her husband are especially intriguing.
  - We might expect her to be critical of Bloom in light of her affair with Blazes Boylan, and it's true that she enumerates many of his faults. But her overall appraisal of Bloom is affirming, and she actually seems to prefer him over all his rivals.
  - She muses on Boylan's sexual prowess, then says, "Poldy has more spunk in him yes," and she thinks approvingly of Bloom's cleanliness and respect for women, his knowledge about the human body, and his sense of responsibility to home and family.
- It is primarily for his ability to understand women and his gift at romance and thoughtfulness that Molly most approves of Bloom, showing again his contrast with Boylan. She frequently recalls her courtship with Bloom and the thrill she experienced then. These are the tendencies in Molly that lead her near the end of the episode to declare, "Ill just give him one more chance," suggesting that the promise of renewed love may await Leopold and Molly on the day after Bloomsday.

### **Molly's Many Moods**

- Joyce seems to suggest that no single mood is definitive of Molly: If her thoughts are contradictory, that is the nature of at least this woman, if not all women.
  - In the "Sirens" episode, Bloom had mused, "Woman. As easy stop the sea." That certainly describes Molly, and it may be Joyce's view of woman as the archetypal force of transformation and renewal: Like the sea, she is always changing and impossible to be bounded or confined.
  - Thus, on the same page as her apparent determination to give Bloom one more chance, Molly reflects on her encounter

with Boylan and acknowledges unapologetically that sexual satisfaction is a high priority for her. In fact, she suggests that it's because of Bloom's inability to make love that she has been driven to the affair with Boylan.

- Molly is certainly satisfied with her affair; several times, she remarks with pleasure on Boylan's sexual prowess and the brute pleasure of their lovemaking. Molly talks about sexuality as a natural human action and rejects Victorian prudery and moralizing about sexual appetites. But she does not approve of Boylan's way of treating a woman, despite her gratitude for the encounter. As her episode approaches its end, her final thoughts of Boylan are a rejection of his crude, violent sexuality.
- Although Molly is often thought of in regard to her sexuality, what she seeks more than physical gratification is acknowledgement of her person and her own expression and identity. She longs especially for a love letter. The effect of such letters is transformative: "true or no it fills up your whole day and life always something to think about every moment and see it all round you like a new world."
  - Bloom is the one who has written her the finest love letters she has received, and there's a sense that the "Penelope" episode is Joyce's own love letter to Molly, who is also, in some sense, his beloved Nora.
  - When we think of the major trends in modern literature toward isolation, solipsism, alienation, and exile, this theme of the love letter is a major countercurrent to modernity and a key element in the overall regenerative impulse of *Ulysses*, an impulse that we see most powerfully in Molly's episode.
- In recounting his day to her, Bloom has evidently said something to Molly about Stephen, because she knows that Stephen declined Bloom's offer to spend the night in their home. Scholars dispute what Stephen's decision implies.

- Does it mean that the father-son reunion is incomplete? Is the Odysseus/Telemachus parallel merely ironic? Is Joyce showing the failure of the two principles of Jew and Greek, everyman and artist, to come together in amity? It's difficult to say, but Molly's musings in the final pages of the novel keep Stephen connected both to Leopold and to herself.
- Molly's imagination turns to the young poet as she lies in bed in the early morning hours. She begins by wondering if she is too old for Stephen, indulging in a sexual fantasy of the young, innocent poet and the more mature, worldly-wise woman.
- Intriguingly, she calculates Stephen's age through comparison to the age of her daughter, Milly, who has just turned 15. A key element in Molly's thoughts is her growing rivalry with her daughter: As Milly moves into maturity, Molly sees herself fading into middle age, sexual passivity, and the role of older mother and, ultimately, grandmother.
- Molly resists this inevitable moving-aside with vigor and even some rage; she wants to retain her identity as a sexually vibrant and desirable woman as long as she can.
- The role of fantasy in reassuring us in our deepest anxieties is one of the key insights Joyce pursues in *Ulysses*. Molly's anxieties and self-doubts are revealed in her fantasies about Stephen. She imagines how wonderful it would be to have Stephen in the house—another person to whom she could converse about her favorite subject: herself. As she thinks about how their relationship might develop, she imagines improving her own knowledge of poetry and art and sharing her ample knowledge of sexual pleasure as part of Stephen's education.
- There is a touch of the pathetic here; the idea that Molly could have a knowledge of poetry that Stephen would find interesting is absurd, and of course, Stephen has been frequenting prostitutes and having sexual experiences since he was a teenager.

- Yet at the same time, one of Stephen's greatest drawbacks is his ignorance about women; one reason he frequents brothels is that he cannot sustain a relationship with a woman that is more than merely commercial and sexual.
- Further, this lack of understanding is a vital part of his failure as a poet. The Stephen at the end of *Portrait* seems poised to become a great artist; the Stephen in *Ulysses* has not fulfilled that promise. Stephen, it seems, is in need of the experience Joyce himself had: meeting a woman who can provide him with the love relationship he has yet to find.
- Molly's other archetypal aspect is that of mother, the creative and nurturing force that generates the entire created world. Her thoughts tend toward both the sexual and the nurturing. As she thinks further of a relationship with Stephen, her identity as a mother and her trauma over the loss of her son come to the forefront.
- We see Molly's trauma over the death of Rudy, as well as her characteristic refusal to wallow in depression—even though this loss is never far from her mind. But sadness and guilt are inimical to Molly's character: Her drive toward life refuses such emotional traps and lends to her character, for all its sexual adventure and duplicity, a charming innocence.

### Summing Up Molly

- As her monologue draws toward its conclusion, Molly's thoughts return to Bloom, much as his thoughts always return to Molly. She reminisces about the day he asked her to marry him. Her final reverie begins with a benediction to nature, with which she feels a kinship: "nature it is as for them saying theres no God I wouldnt give a snap of my two fingers for all their learning why don't they go and create something I often asked him."
- Molly is hardly an orthodox Catholic and is not troubled by church teaching when it comes to her actions and impulses, yet she is not an anti-religious character. Quite the contrary, she continues



Recalling the day Bloom proposed to her on the Hill of Howth, Molly says, "he said I was a flower of the mountain ... yes that was why I liked him because I saw he understood or felt what a woman is."

to assert her belief in a creator and mocks the modernist impulse to deny God's existence. Molly is a figure of bounty, like nature's bounty, and her love corresponds to the creative love of nature. Thus, her musings lead her inevitably to her husband's love, as she recalls Bloom's proposal to her on the Hill of Howth, 16 years before.

- This recollection is a powerful act of regeneration of their youthful love. She recalls the scene of nature's beauty, their sharing of the same food, the passion of their kiss, his romantic words, and how she knew that Bloom understood "what a woman is." This is a praise song for Bloom and for Molly, too, as they once were before the death of Rudy and, perhaps, as they could be again.
- In the final two pages of the novel, the word *yes* comes fast and furious, a litany of affirmation of everything that comes into Molly's mind: youth, love, nature, sexuality, her past, and perhaps, her future with Bloom. Her closing words constitute perhaps the most positive, generous, and life-affirming moment in all of modern literature.

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## Supplementary Reading

Kiberd, *Ulysses and Us*.

Norris, ed., *A Companion to James Joyce's Ulysses*.

## Questions to Consider

1. What difference does it make to have Molly's voice serve as the final voice of *Ulysses*? Why would Joyce give the final words of the book to Molly? What is the effect of this?
2. How can we understand *Ulysses* as a distinctively Irish work? Do you think Joyce saw himself as a writer of the Irish Renaissance?

# Sean O'Casey's Dublin Trilogy

Sean O'Casey is known primarily for three plays from the mid-1920s: *The Shadow of a Gunman*, set during the War of Independence; *Juno and the Paycock*, set during the Irish Civil War; and *The Plough and the Stars*, set during the Easter Rising. These are all deeply historical plays, and all were staged at the Abbey, the national playhouse of Ireland. Yet by the time *The Plough and the Stars* premiered, the Dublin audience had had enough of O'Casey's satire. It seems that once again, controversy was embedded in the way an Irish writer tried to tell his story about who the Irish are and how they came to be.

### Background on O'Casey

- Sean O'Casey was born into a Protestant family in 1880 and grew up in poverty in the north-side tenements of Dublin. His father died when O'Casey was only 6. Although he had little schooling, O'Casey taught himself to read. At age 14, he was sent to work in stockrooms, at clerical jobs, and as a manual laborer.
- With the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, O'Casey became interested in the national revival. He joined the Gaelic League and studied Irish, then joined the IRB. These were the heady days before the Dublin Lockout, when labor was first organizing in Ireland and many in the labor movement hoped that it could find common cause with the nationalist movement.
- O'Casey began his career as a writer during this time, writing journalism and satirical stories for the Gaelic League and labor journals. When the 1913 lockout occurred, O'Casey was a fervent

supporter of Jim Larkin and wrote highly partisan newspaper articles for the union.

- He was unable to get work during this time because of his labor alliances. Even more traumatic, though, was his realization that the nationalist leaders would not support the workers' cause.
- O'Casey foresaw what indeed would be the case in Ireland over the next two decades: that politics would focus overwhelmingly on the national question and that issues of class, labor, and social structure would be swept aside. When the nationalist leaders refused to aid the workers who were suffering during the lockout, O'Casey resigned from the IRB and devoted himself wholly to the workers' cause.
- O'Casey did not participate in the Easter Rising of 1916, and during the War of Independence, he stayed on the sidelines, though he continued his polemical writing. He also began writing poetry and plays. In the fall of 1922, during the Civil War, O'Casey submitted *The Shadow of a Gunman* to the Abbey, where it was staged in April 1923.

### ***The Shadow of a Gunman***

- Set in a boardinghouse room shared by two men, Donal Davoren, a poor poet, and Seumus Shields, a peddler of household goods, *The Shadow of a Gunman* covers one day and night in a typical tenement building. Donal struggles to write poetry at his typewriter, while Seumus fusses over his trinkets and complains about the state of the country.
- The play is set during the War of Independence, and the fear of a raid by the Black and Tans pervades the house. Everyone in the house is under the impression that Donal is an IRA gunman on the run. Part of the play's humor is found in how everyone responds to Donal, thinking him a hardened gunman, when in fact, he's a struggling poet who shows no capacity for daring or action.
- The Dublin audience of the day reacted warmly to O'Casey's humor. He was not poking fun at actual IRA soldiers; he was

mocking the Dublin “characters” and their pretensions to bravery and heroism. At the same time, however, a sense of pathos builds in the play. The lives of these poor people are empty, lacking in hope and purpose; they cling to a fantasy about Donal because it brings something of importance into their sphere.

- Donal does not entirely refute their misunderstanding of him, because he sees that young Minnie, an attractive boarder in the house, is also taken with the idea that he is a dashing and dangerous gunman.
- Early in the first act, Seumus is visited by a fellow salesman, Maguire, who leaves his bag in the room, promising to pick it up later. When Donal and Seumus look into the bag, they discover that it is filled with bombs and learn that Maguire was a real IRA gunman who was killed that afternoon in an ambush.
- Meanwhile, the Black and Tans raid the house. Minnie tells Donal that she'll hide the explosives. The Tans burst in, search the room, beat the two men, and rush downstairs.
  - All the while, Donal and Seumus cower in the face of this threat and pray that Minnie's room won't be searched.
  - We then hear the sound of the Tans taking someone away, and Minnie shouts defiantly, “Up the Republic.” A character named Mrs. Grigson rushes in to report that they found enough explosives in Minnie's room to blow up the whole street.
- Donal shamefully mutters, “We'll never again be able to lift up our heads if anything happens to Minnie.” Suddenly, bombs and guns are heard outside. Mrs. Grigson then reports that the IRA has ambushed the Black and Tans, and in the shootout, Minnie was killed. The play closes with Donal realizing what he has allowed to happen.
- The emotional transformation by the play's end is stunning. In Act I, we were laughing at the absurd pretensions of the characters; by the

end of Act II, we are in tears at the sacrifice of Minnie. And she wasn't sacrificed for the republican cause, but because the man she thought she was protecting was only the shadow of a gunman. Minnie's death, like her life, was itself a shadow, a pretense of meaning.

### ***Juno and the Paycock***

- *Juno and the Paycock* is also set in the Dublin tenements and focuses on another set of pretentious and talkative characters. "Captain" Jack is the father of the family, who does no work and spends what little money there is drinking with his pal Joxer. His daughter, Mary, is on strike, and his son, Johnny, is handicapped, having been wounded in the War of Independence. Only Juno, the wife and mother, is working.
- At the end of Act I, an attorney informs Jack that he has come into a large inheritance. The second act shows Jack having bought flashy clothes and expensive goods on the promise of his inheritance, but as the celebration goes on, the funeral of Johnny's former IRA comrade, assassinated by the Free State soldiers, passes by. Again, in the midst of boisterous foolery, O'Casey provides a grim reminder of the harsh reality of the larger world.
- In the third act, we learn that that through a legal error, Jack will not get his inheritance. Mary has become pregnant, and Jack renounces her, going off with Joxer to drink. Meanwhile, Johnny is shot by the IRA as an informer. Because Juno realizes that Jack will never take responsibility for his family, she and Mary leave the house, but first, Juno must identify the body of her dead son.
- This play is even bleaker than *Shadow of a Gunman*. Its generous approval of Juno's mother instinct and the hope that Mary's unborn child will live are balanced by the reality that the child will be born into a world of chaos.

### ***The Plough and the Stars***

- *The Plough and the Stars* is set during the Easter Rising, in effect, the start of Ireland's attainment of independence. It examines the genesis of the Irish Free State and, through its negative portrayal

of that genesis, suggests that the whole enterprise may well be poisoned from the start.

- The play focuses on Jack and Nora Clitheroe, a young married couple living in the Dublin tenements. The Clitheroes love each other, and Nora is expecting a child. Ironically, what comes between them is Jack's commitment to assume his role as a brigade commandant in the Easter Rising. Nora bitterly opposes this, partly because she realizes that it is not patriotic duty that motivates Jack but his own vanity. This questioning of the motivation of the heroes of 1916 was a bold move by O'Casey.
- The second act is set in a pub. Outside, a nationalist speaker addresses the crowd, and we hear snippets of his speech throughout the act. The speaker is not named, but most of his words are culled from the speeches of Patrick Pearse. Inside the pub, we meet Rosie, a prostitute, who mocks the heroic pretensions of the rebels and complains that the ambitions of independence are bad for her business.
- Earlier in the play, Nora watched a group of army recruits march past on their way to the front in the Great War.
  - O'Casey brilliantly puts all these elements together: Pearse's cry for Irish blood sacrifice, the men marching off to be slaughtered, the prostitute and the drunkards in the pub.
  - He seeks to undercut the abstract idealism of the rebels to equate what they're doing with the senseless slaughter of the soldiers in the trenches and to equate all this with prostitution and drinking.
- The third act is set during the rising itself; we hear shots and the British artillery shelling the GPO. Nora is near-mad with fear for Jack, so much so that she goes into early labor.

- The fourth act opens with the word that Nora's baby has been stillborn. Then, Captain Brennan rushes onstage to report Jack's death and his last words to Bessie, a neighbor who has been taking care of Nora: "Mrs. Clitheroe's grief will be a joy when she realizes that she has had a hero for a husband." Nora now wanders onstage in madness, grieving for the death of her husband and child. The deaths suggest that Ireland's past and future are both dead; only the grim present exists.
- One of the remarkable elements of the play is Bessie's caretaking of Nora, who would otherwise surely die. But Bessie's generosity is betrayed when she rushes to pull Nora away from the window for fear of snipers, and Bessie herself is shot. The play closes with two British soldiers sipping tea while the final attack on the GPO is heard.
- O'Casey's portrayal of the heroes of 1916 was anathema to a Dublin audience that had elevated those men to near-sainthood, and the reaction to the play was intensely negative. Nevertheless, O'Casey continued writing bold, experimental plays, as well as a six-volume autobiography that constitutes one of the most insightful memoirs of Ireland in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

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## Supplementary Reading

Murray, *Seán O'Casey, Writer at Work*.

O'Casey, *Three Dublin Plays*.

## Questions to Consider

1. What were the crucial events in O'Casey's life that shaped him as an Irish playwright?
2. How does O'Casey's Dublin Trilogy tell the story of the events of Ireland's War for Independence? What stance toward Irish history does O'Casey take in these plays?

# Life and Legacy of Lady Gregory

In late 1898, Lady Gregory set out from Coole Park on a peculiar quest: to find the cottage of an old woman, Biddy Early. The account of her journey forms the opening of one of the early sections of Gregory's *Visions and Beliefs in the West of Ireland*. Gregory places this account early in the book to show the reader that this is not just a journey to find the figures and sources of Ireland's folklore traditions, but it is also Gregory's own journey to find herself, to shed those parts of her Anglo-Irish heritage that she wishes to reject and discover those parts of her Irish identity that she most wants to cherish and nurture.

## Lady Gregory and Irish Folktales

- During her travels, Lady Gregory had gathered dozens of stories about Biddy Early, said to be both a healer and a witch. Some said she got her powers from the fairies because she had been “away” among them for a time. Why would Gregory be so drawn to this legendary woman? Although Gregory always denied believing in the magical power of fairies, there was a part of her that always found this lore irresistible.
- The vibrancy of the folk imagination drew Gregory to folk stories. Her quest to find Biddy Early's home, to make her way through the Irish landscape back into the world of legend, was ultimately a quest to come into contact with that imagination and creative power. Although Gregory claimed not to believe in the metaphysics of the stories, she showed great respect for the language of their telling.

- Gregory engaged in a lifelong effort to balance these seemingly discordant facts about herself: her Anglo-Irish heritage and her attraction to the ways of the Irish peasantry. The effort was challenged by the events in Ireland in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.
  - In the years leading up to World War I, as the Asquith-Redmond Home Rule bill proposed in 1912 began to seem a likely reality, Gregory was skeptical of the extent to which such large-scale, international political agreements could truly affect the lives of ordinary Irish folk.
  - Gregory was also concerned about the extreme nationalist groups, such as Sinn Fein, the Irish Volunteers, and the Irish Republican Brotherhood, yet she recognized that these groups were faithful to the needs of the common folk and that their leadership in many cases sprang from those very folk.

## Tragedy in World War I

- When World War I broke out, Gregory was particularly torn. She harbored no love for the British imperial enterprise and had undergone a profound education in the potential injustices of British rule. At one point, she pronounced, “I defy anyone to study Irish history for long without developing a distinct dislike for the British Empire.”
- Her stance toward the war was further complicated by the fact that her son, Robert, had entered the military by taking a commission in the Connacht Rangers. Gregory constantly fretted over Robert’s safety. In a previous lecture, we saw how devastated she was when Robert was killed in 1918. She also suffered the deaths in combat of five of her nephews and the death of another nephew, Hugh Lane, on the *Lusitania*.
  - Lane was the son of Gregory’s sister, Arabella. He was a brilliant art collector, and his great project was to establish a modern art gallery in Dublin. He pledged to donate his extraordinary collection of modern paintings to the city of

Dublin if the city would build a proper gallery in which to house them.

- Controversy over the project dragged on for years, and finally, Lane withdrew his offer in disgust. After his death, however, Lady Gregory found in Lane's papers a codicil to his will, in which he expressly wished to donate 39 paintings to Dublin. Gregory took it upon herself to get the British government to return the 39 paintings to Dublin, and she worked tirelessly to persuade the British consul and the National Gallery to recognize Lane's bequest.
- In some ways, this was the last thing Gregory could do on behalf of her nephew and the generation of young men whose possible contributions to Ireland were lost forever in the war. Perhaps in some way, it was also an effort to redeem the Anglo-Irish class from which she had sprung. Lane had been castigated for his desires to impose his Anglo-European tastes on the Irish populace. Gregory hoped to salvage his reputation and, by extension, the reputation of her class.

## Gregory's Activities in Ireland

- The Easter Rising also affected Gregory in personal ways. Patrick Pearse and Thomas MacDonagh, two of the executed leaders, were personally known to Gregory and had both written plays that had been performed at the Abbey. But more than this, she recognized what the aftermath of the rising and the executions of the leaders would mean for Ireland. The hope that she and Yeats had fostered, that art and culture could overcome political division and create an ideal Irish unity, was dashed.
- But Gregory did not abandon the political sphere. In the 1920s, while the War of Independence and the Civil War raged, she took an active part, using the gifts she had.
  - When the Black and Tan atrocities were at their height, Gregory wrote a series of short articles for *The Nation* that

chronicled the murders and acts of terror perpetrated by the Tans.

- Gregory's biographer, Judith Hill, states that Gregory wrote the dispatches "to expose the violence and bring it to an end." Yet Gregory was also conscious that she attended the Protestant church and that she was still, by birth, position, religion, and culture, allied with those who were now perpetrating crimes on the Irish folk whom she so loved and admired. She was in an impossible situation.

### Gregory's Late Plays

- The apparent impossibility of reconciling her position and her loyalties found expression in Gregory's late plays. In the 1920s, her plays turned away from comedy and tragedy. Instead, she began composing what are best described as wonder plays or miracle plays, an ancient dramatic form that seemed to match the nearly impossible situation in which she found herself.
- One such play was *The Story Brought by Brigit*, featuring Saint Brigit, the patroness of the home and the arts.
  - In the play, Brigit has seen Christ in a vision and now appears as a witness to the miracle of Christ. A woman says to her, "Indeed it is a heart-broken story you will have to bring back to Ireland." But Brigit replies, "No; but a great story and a great praise I will bring with me. I have heard him myself, and know that this is indeed the Christ, the savior of the world."
  - Christ is praised in the play because he is a homeless wanderer. Gregory proclaims that he is "a man from beyond the world" and that "God does not dwell in houses made of hands." Near the play's end, the character Joel states that "If he was not a rebel itself, his name will surely be written in the book of the people." It's as if Christ is an Irish bard, a figure who will suffer greatly to bring redemption to the fallen land.

- Gregory's life was lived between two apparently irreconcilable poles, but in this play, she sees a path of reconciliation in the person of Christ—albeit a distinctly Irish Christ.
- This vision of redemption—of reconciling the deep divides in Irish culture—also finds expression in Gregory's final play, *Dave*, set during the Famine.
  - Early in the play, a secular “book” is put forth in the doggerel history that Nicholas, an old man, reads to assert his family's longevity and dignity. This book, he exclaims, tells us “what people are worth nothing, and which of them are worth while.” Nicholas embodies those who are housed, those who have traded vision for the meager security of shelter. This means that they turn on those who sympathize with the wanderers.
  - Wandering is the state of Dave in the play, a 17-year-old servant boy who was “left at the side of a ditch by vagabones of tinkers that were travelling the roads of the world since the day of the Crucifixion.” Dave and the “vagabones” are traced back to Christ in an alternative genealogy to that sought by Nicholas, one that does not divide people into the worthwhile and the naught but joins all in a common union.
  - When Dave is beaten by Joseph (another servant), Kate, the woman of the house, kneels by him and prays for all those “astray in the lonesome world [who had] ... been bruised on the world's roads.” The prayer ends with a ballad.
  - Dave awakens from the song transfigured; Kate exclaims, “Sometimes a vision is sent through the passion sleep of the night,” and Dave is now determined to go back on the road to serve “my people,” those dying of fever throughout Connacht and Connemara.
  - The vision granted Dave brings together the downtrodden and the outcasts—all those wanderers who people Gregory's

plays. The visionary moment simultaneously takes one out of this world and immerses one fully within it.

- Gregory finished the play in 1925 and said of it: “Instead of striving to get to Heaven [*Dave is*] striving to bring Heaven about us on earth.”

## Gregory’s Final Years

- Gregory’s greatest “work” in her final years was her dedication to her beloved grandchildren, Richard, Anne, and Catherine, who stayed with Gregory during the Christmas, Easter, and summer holidays. In her lovely memoir of those childhood years at Coole, Anne Gregory recalled “dear, dear Grandma” reading to the children, teaching them their subjects, helping them learn about the woods and the animals, and telling them folk stories.
- In her last years, Gregory battled cancer with stoicism and bravery. Coole Park eventually had to be sold, but Gregory was allowed to stay on as caretaker for an annual rent of 100 pounds. The former landed aristocrat was now herself a tenant, watching the nation change around her.
- In her final year, Yeats was with Gregory almost ceaselessly. On nearly the last day of her life, her granddaughters came to be with her until she passed away on May 22, 1932.
- At the time of her death, Gregory was 80 years old and had witnessed the transformation of Ireland from its days immediately after the famine to its first years of independence. As much as anyone, she had led and chronicled the period of the Irish Renaissance. The success of the Abbey Theatre owes more to her than to any other person, and her support of Yeats, Synge, and many other writers and artists was incalculable.

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## Supplementary Reading

Gregory, Anne, *Me and Nu*.

Gregory, Lady Augusta, *Seventy Years*.

———, *Visions and Beliefs in the West of Ireland*.

## Questions to Consider

1. What most attracted Gregory to the folklore and peasant tales that she collected and interpreted? What was she really seeking in these stories?
2. How did Gregory balance her Anglo-Irish Ascendancy heritage with her commitment to Irish nationalism and independence? Why would she support a movement that she knew would sound the death knell for her own class and culture?

# Yeats: The Tower Poems and Beyond

In the spring of 1917, W. B. Yeats purchased an old Norman tower house from the Irish state. Located in an area known as Ballylee, this tower had once belonged to the estate owned by William Gregory. The property included a cottage connected to the ancient stone tower. He relished the idea of living in the Irish countryside, particularly in the west of Ireland. But more than anything else, he was drawn to the idea of this ancient tower, filled with historical associations and centuries of conflict, transformation, and symbolism. Yeats had always been a seeker for a sense of home, and his tower would be his effort to constitute that sense.

## Yeats and George Hyde-Lees

- After proposing to Maud Gonne numerous times and being rejected, Yeats married George Hyde-Lees in 1917. George was intent on making the marriage work. Ultimately, she would be the one who transformed Yeats from a tortured, vulnerable, and self-doubting man into a family man, and he would discover a new emotional and artistic identity through this transformation.
- On their honeymoon, Yeats was tormented by the idea that he had made a mistake. George, in desperation, attempted automatic writing—a spiritual exercise in which one writes what the spirits dictate, trying to channel an otherworldly voice onto paper. George seemed to have a natural facility at this sort of writing. The words flowed readily as if guided by a spiritual communicant. To Yeats, it seemed as if the spirit world was speaking to him through George.

- George and Yeats then began a regimen of automatic writing. Each day, George would perform the automatic writing. Yeats would study it and came to believe that the voices were communicating to him, giving him direction for his personal life, his poetry, and his philosophical thought. Over time, this became a fascinating, complex, creative collaboration between the two.
- It seems likely that George turned to automatic writing as a way to arrest her husband's regret. Seeing his enthusiasm, however, perhaps she began to seek something deeper in the experience. At some point, the meditative energy of the process, combined with Yeats's own fascination, may have shifted George into a state in which she really thought she was hearing voices and receiving otherworldly instruction. For his part, Yeats seized on the writing and began to transform its results into his own esoteric system of metaphysical speculation.

### ***A Vision***

- Eventually, Yeats began to form a spiritual philosophy and a theory of historical transformation out of these writings. He always longed to construct a system whereby the metaphysical world would be seen in harmony with the world of history and with his own personal life. This formed the material for *A Vision*.
- This book is intentionally confounding; indeed, we could argue that Yeats did not mean for it to be understood, or at least, he didn't think anyone but himself would ever fully appreciate the positions he outlines.
- *A Vision* reflects the deepest thought, speculation, and conviction of Yeats himself, based on the spiritual communications he felt he was receiving through the automatic writing of George and filtered through his decades of spiritual and occult study and speculation.
- The book's primary thesis is that human beings are driven by two main principles: our "primary" and "antithetical" impulses. By this, Yeats means essentially our objective and subjective drives, or our

conscious and subconscious selves. We alternate between these impulses in a kind of cosmic wheel of the self, consisting of 28 phases or types.

- We are never a single kind of self. Rather, we are at war with the different principles of ourselves, oscillating between primary and antithetical, objective and subjective.
- All of us consist of four faculties that Yeats labeled Will, Creative Mind, the Body of Fate, and the Mask. Each of these is a process by which we assume one aspect of the self, or mask, then struggle with other possibilities, eventually abandoning one mask and donning another.
- The point of greatest interest in this book is probably the portrait Yeats painted of a mind at war with itself yet always seeking unity and order. Yeats is always a poet of twoness, of being drawn in multiple directions. It is this quality of constant seeking that gives his poetry such power and beauty.
- We saw this same principle of movement, destruction, and creation in his theory of the gyres, those twin movements of destruction and creation whose intersection marks the point of cataclysm. Yeats believed that his own era was precisely such a point of imminent apocalypse.
- *A Vision* seems to have given Yeats a series of patterns and ideas that he could use as a foundation for his subsequent poetry.
  - He came to see himself as a poet of historical transformation, one whose themes were timeless precisely because his most profound meditations came to focus on the concept of history and how history is created.
  - Rather than writing just about the traumas of Irish history alone, he turned to the trauma that is history itself, developing

the ideas of conflict, violence, and cataclysmic change as the basis of all historical processes.

### “Leda and the Swan”

- Written in 1924, in the wake of the Civil War, “Leda and the Swan” is about the clash of one era or world meeting another. The poem is based on the Greek myth of the rape of Leda by Zeus, who appears in the form of a swan. The result of this rape is the birth of Helen, who would bring about the catastrophe of the Trojan War.
- The poem’s opening eight lines vividly describe the rape of Leda. Yeats is careful to express both the awe-inspiring power of the god and the reaction of the mortal woman, which is a complex mix of passivity, helplessness, awe, terror, and in some sense, excitement. Leda is the figure with whom Yeats most identifies or whom he most wants to understand: the mortal woman whom the god penetrated.
- In the last three lines of the poem, Yeats wonders what happened to Leda during and immediately after the rape: “Being so caught up, / So mastered by the brute blood of the air, / Did she put on his knowledge with his power / Before the indifferent beak could let her drop?”
- Here, we begin to see why Yeats was so fascinated with Leda. In the moment of her union with Zeus, she became part of the divine spirit: “she put on his knowledge with his power.” This is the experience for which Yeats longed: to have an experience of divine union in which the knowledge and power of the spirits would, even if only temporarily, become his.

### *The Tower*

- “Leda and the Swan” is the central poem in Yeats’s 1928 volume, *The Tower*. This book emerged out of the complex period of Yeats’s life involving his marriage, his communication with the spirit world, and his growing sense of history as rupture and cataclysm. *The Tower* also reflects Yeats’s effort to digest the historical events of

the preceding decade: World War I, the Easter Rising, the War of Independence, and the Civil War.

- The title poem, “The Tower,” offers a picture of Yeats atop his tower, casting his imagination into the world in an effort to make sense of its apparent chaos. This is the book’s invocation, in effect: Yeats calls not on some external muse but, rather, on his own imagination, which he believes can encompass history, the spirit world, and his own emerging subconscious in an effort to express the meaning of the modern world.
- The Norman tower at Ballylee is not just the setting of these poems but also their theme. The longest poem of the collection, “Meditations in Time of Civil War,” explores the meaning of the tower’s role in history. The central importance of the tower is the inspiration it gives to Yeats in writing these poems.
  - What Yeats found in the tower is “daemonic rage”—that is, the combination of spiritual power and historical rupture—that drives all things, most notably, his own imagination. At the end of these meditations on historical meaning, Yeats uncovers what he terms “emblems of adversity.”
  - As he contemplates the meaning of the tower, these emblems of adversity emerge with increasing power. The Norman towers that dominate the Irish landscape, of course, are the work of conquerors. Yeats sees in the tower the foundation of bloody conflict. But rather than be appalled by this legacy of violence, he exults in it, because from such conflict emerges the dynamic power of life itself.

### ***The Winding Stair and Other Poems***

- Yeats’s next book, *The Winding Stair and Other Poems*, offers a counter to the mood of *The Tower*. At the tower’s center is a winding staircase. Yeats felt that the symbol of the tower—vertical, powerful, arrogant, fixed—was balanced by the symbol of the stair—winding, changing, always in motion. If the tower

reflected what he would call “bloody, arrogant power,” the stair suggests “winding, gyring, spiring” movement. These are like the two great principles of the human psyche outlined in *A Vision*.

- *The Tower* and *The Winding Stair* represent two of the most significant works of poetry of the 20th century. But if *The Tower* offers a challenge to the world, an arrogant and prideful assertion of power and mastery, *The Winding Stair* is more elegiac, looking at a world that is passing away as the poet himself ages.

### “Under Ben Bulben”

- In his final years, Yeats’s chief subject in his poetry was his own mind and imagination as it struggled to make sense of the drives and destinies of the world. In the last year of his life, 1939, Yeats wrote “Under Ben Bulben,” a magisterial farewell poem.
- “Under Ben Bulben” is, among many other things, a call to Irish poets to aim for greatness, not to shirk the demands and sacrifices

#### Excerpt from “Under Ben Bulben”

by W. B. Yeats

Under bare Ben Bulben’s head  
In Drumcliff churchyard Yeats is laid,  
An ancestor was rector there  
Long years ago; a church stands near,  
By the road an ancient Cross.  
No marble, no conventional phrase,  
On limestone quarried near the spot  
By his command these words are cut:  
*Cast a cold eye  
On life, on death.  
Horseman, pass by!*



Ben Bulbin, the place of Yeats's grave, is a dramatic, flat-topped mountain in Sligo that has many associations in fairy lore and mythology.

that their art requires. For Yeats, this means singing of his two favored aspects of Irish culture: the noble peasant and the heroic aristocrat.

- The poem is a backward glance at the scope of modern Irish history, from heroic rebellion, to folk culture, to Yeats's idealized nobility. Recall that Yeats's great ambition was to be the Irish poet of all ages. Here, he defines that poetic greatness as essentially the sweep and subject of his own poetry. He also enjoins these themes and ideas on the Irish poets who will follow him.
- Yeats even composed his own epitaph at the end of "Under Ben Bulbin," writing the very words that would ultimately be carved on the headstone over his grave at Drumcliff churchyard.

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## Supplementary Reading

Yeats, *The Tower*.

———, *A Vision*.

———, *The Winding Stair and Other Poems*.

## Questions to Consider

1. What effect did the automatic writing of his wife, George, have on Yeats? What did he determine the writing meant? How do you evaluate the writing?
2. What did his tower, Thoor Ballylee, come to mean for Yeats? How did it affect the way he interpreted Irish history and the way he presented that history in his poetry?

# Blasket Island Storytellers

In the early 1900s, an English scholar named Robin Flower, who would eventually become the keeper of manuscripts at the British Museum, traveled to the Blasket Islands, the last outcroppings of land from Ireland before the wild, open Atlantic. Flower sought to learn the Irish language from its inhabitants, but he ended up falling in love with the Blasket Islands, their people, language, wild seascape, and timeless culture. He returned every year for years to stay with the islanders, and he wrote multiple books about the islands and about Irish history and poetry. Generations later, Flower is still recalled fondly by the descendants of the islanders. What drew him to this wild and isolated area to study Irish?

## The Blasket Islands

- The Blasket Islands are six small islands set off the edge of Ireland and, hence, on the edge of Western Europe. The largest of them is the Great Blasket Island. This was the only continually inhabited Blasket Island, and on its sheltered southern slope, facing the Dingle Peninsula, was the Village. Here, at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, was a thriving community of about 200 people, living as their ancestors had for centuries.
- Supported by fishing, scavenging, trading, and small-scale farming, the Blasket islanders were a nearly subsistent economy. And their spoken language was essentially unchanged over the centuries. This perfectly preserved spoken Irish was what brought Flower and a handful of other European scholars to the Blaskets in the early 1900s.



Because of its isolation and the lack of development throughout the west of Ireland in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Great Blasket Island was a sort of time capsule in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

- These scholars interacted with the islanders and encouraged them to tell their own stories in their own language. These native writers then recorded their stories in Irish, thus creating a small “library” of Blasket life. These books are far less romantic, sentimental, and filled with fairy lore than we might expect. Instead, they are realistic, even gritty, tellings of the reality of Irish island life and its enormous demands.
- Three Blasket writers are particularly famous: Tomas O’Criomthain, Maurice O’Sullivan, and Peig Sayers. In their lives, we discover an astonishing island culture.

### **Tomas O’Criomthain**

- Tomas O’Criomthain was born on the Great Blasket around 1855; he spent his entire life on the island and the nearby Dingle

Peninsula. In 1928, he published *An tOileánach*, or *The Islandman*, which was essentially the story of his life on the Great Blasket. But the book is far more than one man's life story; it is the story of a culture, caught just at the moment it was disappearing forever.

- Part of what makes the book so vivid is the lively quality of Tomas's voice and the obvious zest for life he had as a young boy and man. Much of his story is structured like a classic coming-of-age tale, even an epic in miniature. Telling of his first visit to Dingle, Tomas explicitly compares this journey to that of great heroes in the legendary past. The fact that the "big city" here is the town of Dingle, barely 1,000 people, suggests the isolation of the island life for this young man and the true vastness of the world that lies beyond.
  
- In keeping with the epic structure of his tale, Tomas narrates his first great battle. He goes out early one morning to gather seaweed on one of the isolated stretches of beach. There, he is surprised to find a great seal on the strand. He explains that, to the islanders, a seal was valued more than a pig for its meat. He tries to kill the seal and thinks he has succeeded, but the seal suddenly turns on him and bites his leg.
  - Behind this great battle stands the whole struggle for survival of the island people and their way of life: a desperate fight against the forces of nature and whatever other monsters might approach: storm, famine, or sickness.
  - Tomas succeeds in killing the seal, but he is certain his own wound is mortal. The other islanders find him and bring him home. They are astonished at the size of the seal and at Tomas's prowess in killing it but are certain he is going to lose his leg.
  - His uncle then provides a folk cure involving wrapping a piece of the seal over the flesh of Tomas's wound. The cure is successful. It's as if Tomas is cured by the very animal he

killed—a mythic rite-of-passage in which the young man is initiated into manhood and bonds with his prey.

- The book is filled with such moments. Tomas describes his experiences in youthful love and how disappointed he was when his parents chose a wife for him from a neighboring island family, rather than the young woman of whom he was enamored. Yet his description of the process shows its necessity and the fact that the island community could not afford the luxury of marrying for mere romance or youthful affection when survival of the community itself was at stake.
- After his marriage, Tomas describes building his own house, stone by stone, without any help. It's another mythic act, the building of the home, and Tomas's emphasis on his self-reliance shows what he values and what it takes to survive the harsh island life. It also shows the real, daily need to create a shelter from the storms and duress of the harsh Atlantic.
- These moments of building a family and a home are balanced, almost negated, by moments of tragedy and loss. Tomas narrates the deaths of his father and mother with detachment and brevity, but the pain of the losses is apparent. Further, many family members leave for America, and Tomas laments the loss of childhood and family that emigration requires.
- Most sorrowful of all, a number of Tomas's children die. These deaths take a terrible toll on his wife, who he says, "never lasted to be old." Tomas's response to her death is poignant, especially in light of their arranged marriage: "I was completely upset and muddled after that ... when comrades part, the one that remains can but blunder along only too often, and so it was with me. ... My low spirits did not leave me soon this time."
- But a contrary impulse is at work that moves against decline and death. This is the developing narrative of Tomas's growth into his role as storyteller. The island poet continually singles Tomas

out as the young man who needs to take down the poems and stories that the poet carries in his head. Dutifully, Tomas agrees to write down the poems as the poet recites them. Thus, the great transmission of the poetic tradition commences, from the island poet's oral memory to Tomas's written text.

- This is continued in Tomas's constant retelling of the stories and tales he hears from others, until gradually, we realize that his book is a record of the storytelling tradition that otherwise would have vanished when the Great Blasket was evacuated. His book is a living museum that contains an essential part of Irish culture that was in danger of being lost.

### Maurice O'Sullivan

- Maurice O'Sullivan was born nearly 50 years after Tomas. His book, *Fiche Blian ag Fas*, or *Twenty Years A'Growin*, is the coming-of-age tale of a young man looking back on his childhood on the Great Blasket. Maurice was just 29 years old when his book was published in 1933. He had left the Blaskets six years earlier and was a policeman in Connemara when he wrote the book. His perspective, then, is less insular than that of Tomas.
- Maurice places the Blasket phenomenon more clearly in the context of the modern world. He speaks movingly about the emigration experience and how many of the islanders left for America. Maurice's account of the Blasket life is the most optimistic and, to many, the most beloved of all the Blasket books.

### Peig Sayers

- Falling chronologically between Tomas and Maurice is Peig Sayers, who was born in 1873 on the mainland. Peig married "into the island" at the age of 19 and soon was raising 10 children in a small cottage that also contained her husband's mother, father, and two brothers. Peig had a remarkable gift for storytelling, folklore, and vivid speech; she was in the great oral storytelling tradition known as the *seanchai*, or teller of old tales.

- Robin Flower came to know Peig and encouraged other scholars to visit her. One such scholar, Kenneth Jackson, eventually collected many of Peig's stories and published them in 1938 as *Scealta on mBlascaod*, or *Stories from the Blasket*. Because Peig could not write in Irish, her son, Mike File, or Mike the Poet, wrote out her stories for a second book, *An Old Woman's Reflections*.
- Flower described Peig as "a natural orator, with so keen a sense of the turn of phrase and the lifting rhythm appropriate to Irish that her words could be written down as they leave her lips, and they would have the effect of literature with no savour of the artificiality of composition." The glory of Peig's book is its vivid, personal voice, as if we were sitting next to this woman as she related these tales.
- Peig is a key figure in the survival and transmission of the Irish language. Bryan MacMahon, the great North Kerry writer and translator of *Peig*, her autobiography, has described her as "one of the great narrators of the wonder-tales of Gaelic Ireland." And if the world she tells of is often bleak and full of hardship, nevertheless, she describes that world with affection and love.

## Evacuation of the Island

- By 1953, only 20 people were still living on the Great Blasket. The young had all left, and those who remained could no longer provide for themselves. Just a few years before, a young man had died of meningitis because they were unable to cross the stormy Blasket Sound to get to the doctor. It was time for the islanders to say farewell to their home. They evacuated the Great Blasket forever, most of them settling into Dunquin. From there, they would spend their lives looking out across the sound to their island home.
- To this day, the Blaskets retain the quality of a way of life that has vanished, but thanks to the marvelous Blasket Island writers, that vanished life is not forgotten. It lives on in their books and forms a crucial part of the Irish Revival and the Irish identity.

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## Supplementary Reading

O'Crohan, *The Islandman*.

O'Sullivan, *Twenty Years A-Growing*.

Sayers, *Peig*.

## Questions to Consider

1. What drew so many writers, translators, and scholars to the Great Blasket Islands? How did those outsiders interact with the great storytellers whom they met there: Tomas, Peig, Maurice, and the others?
2. How does the phenomenon of the Great Blasket storytellers fit into the overall narrative of the Irish Renaissance? What do you make of the fact that these Irish-language storytellers were thriving at the same time as Gregory, Yeats, and Joyce? How does this add to our portrait of modern Ireland?

# *Finnegans Wake:* Joyce's Final Epic

One of Joyce's fundamental ideas for *Finnegans Wake* is that if *Ulysses* was his book of the day, then the *Wake* would be his book of the night. Put differently, *Ulysses* was a book of waking consciousness, rendered through a range of styles and techniques; these styles are all Joyce's efforts to represent the workings of the human mind in our waking hours, how we process and interpret and represent our world to ourselves and to others. But increasingly, Joyce realized that our waking consciousness is only part of how our mind works. At night, in sleep, in our dreams, our consciousness is working all the time and in perhaps more fundamental and revealing ways than during the day.

### The Earwicker Family

- *Finnegans Wake* is, on one level, the dream of one man, Humphrey Chimpden Earwicker, a pub keeper. His wife is Anna Livia Plurabelle, and they have three children: a daughter, Isabel, and twin sons, Shem and Shaun. This family is the early-20<sup>th</sup>-century version of the eternal family: husband and wife, warring brothers, enticing daughter.
- Earwicker is all fathers. In his comic aspects, he is concerned with managing his wife and daughter; bothered by the constant bickering of his sons; worried about his pub business; concerned over his aging and his prurient desires for younger women; and afraid of failure in work, love, and sex. At the same time, Earwicker is also every mythic father figure: In the Irish tradition, he is the great warrior-hero Finn MacCool; in the biblical tradition, he is

Noah, Abraham, and Moses. Throughout the book, he assumes endless identities in this role.

- Similarly, Anna Livia stands for or becomes all wife-mothers in history, religion, and myth: Penelope, Mary, Sarah, Rachel, Clytemnestra, Frigg, and so on. We saw a version of this in *Ulysses*, where Bloom is analogous to Odysseus and Molly is analogous to Penelope, but here, it's not an analogy; it's an identity: Earwicker is Abraham, and Anna Livia is Sarah, while also still being a Dublin publican and his wife.
- The same is true of Shem and Shaun; they stand for all the warring sons in myth and history: Cain and Abel, Isaac and Ishmael, Thor and Loki, Romulus and Remus. And they are all the dualistic oppositions in human culture: change versus stasis, devil versus angel, time versus space, Jew versus Christian, the exiled artist versus the bourgeois citizen, and more. They are not just two different figures either; they are also the two halves of their father, the oppositions that war within every man.
- Isabel is partly a younger version of her mother and will supplant her eventually. She is also the object of desire by her father, who fantasizes about an incestuous relationship with the girl that will restore his virility. She is also split in her personality, seeing her opposite self in the mirror and hoping to project her sinful self onto that other, to retain her own innocence.

### **The Language of *Finnegans Wake***

- The first words on the opening page of the book are as follows: “riverrun, past Eve and Adam’s, from swerve of shore to bend of bay, brings us by a commodious vicus of recirculation back to Howth Castle and Environs.”
- Given that the first word is not capitalized, the book seems to start in the middle of a sentence that comes from somewhere else, flowing like the running river suggested in the word *riverrun*. The river runs “past Eve and Adam’s,” and in fact, the River Liffey flows

past the Church of the Immaculate Conception. Of course, Eve and Adam also refer to the beginning of human time in the book of Genesis, the first humans whose fall set in motion the tangled skein of human history.

- This running river ends at the ancient Howth Castle. “Howth Castle and Environs” also gives us the initials *HCE*, which stand for our central dreamer, Humphrey Chimpden Earwicker, whom Joyce often signals in the text through three words that begin with those letters: “Haveth Childers Everywhere,” “High Church of England,” and many more. The way we get to Earwicker is not by a linear path, either in space or time; rather, it is “by a commodious vicus of recirculation,” meaning motion, as in dreams, swirling, returning, recirculating—not unlike the life principle itself.
- The last paragraph on the opening page describes a great fall and includes a parenthetical run of letters: “(bababadalgharaghtakamminarronnkonn ...).” In fact, these letters constitute multiple different words from different languages, all of which mean “thunder.” This is 1 of 10 such *thunder words* in the *Wake*, each of which contains 100 letters, except the 10<sup>th</sup>, which has 101 letters. The total is 1,001, the number of Scheherazade’s infinite storytelling from *The Thousand and One Arabian Nights*. The thunder words signal an apocalyptic fall and the inauguration of a new age of myth and history.
- In this paragraph, we also learn of “the fall of a once wallstrait oldparr”—the fall of the once supreme father, now being cast down or toppled by time or rebellion of the young. This is an oft-told story: “retaled early in bed and later on life down through all Christian minstrelsy”; it is, in short, the repeated story of all myth, religion, and history.
  - The fall in this case is that of Finnegan, also identified with Humpty Dumpty of Lewis Carroll’s *Alice* books, one of the major background texts to Joyce’s work.

- The image of the egg—symbolic of fertility and birth—falling and shattering matched perfectly Joyce’s ideas of civilization, except Joyce then reassembles the egg and has the whole cycle begin again.
- As this paragraph ends, we see that this is not just a universal story but a peculiarly Irish one, too. In particular, “Finnegan” is not just a standard Irish name; it’s also the title of a well-known Irish drinking song.
  - In the song, Tim Finnegan is a working man with a fondness for whiskey. One day, he falls from a ladder, lands on his head, and appears to be dead. His friends lay out his corpse and begin the traditional Irish wake.
  - Soon, the merriment turns to riot, and a bottle of whiskey shatters above the corpse. When the whiskey splashes on Finn, he miraculously revives and joins in his own party. The final stanza of the song gives voice to the resurrection theme Joyce uses throughout his book.
- The title for arguably the most ambitious, complex, far-reaching work of literature in Western culture is a bawdy Irish drinking song. This is funny—and it’s meant to be. *Finnegans Wake* is a profoundly humorous book. Recall that *Ulysses* finally turns away from tragedy and embraces the life-affirming, regenerative spirit of comedy. This is even truer of *Finnegans Wake*, which though it is filled with falls, deaths, and apocalyptic destruction, always begins again with an affirmation of the indomitability of the life principle.

### Themes of *Finnegans Wake*

- This pattern of rising, falling, and rising again is the fundamental human pattern, the nativity/crucifixion/resurrection pattern of Christianity and of all mythic religions. In Finnegan’s fall, we see the fall of all heroes and gods, including Satan, Adam, Noah, Chronos, and Prometheus, as well as Parnell, Napoleon, Richard III, Finn MacCool, Cuchulain, and many others. And in Joyce’s



Joyce was drawn to Giambattista Vico's cyclical view of history because it negated the 19<sup>th</sup>-century linear view; the moderns felt that the idea of endless progress of humankind had been buried by the horrors of World War I.

scheme, all these falling figures rise again, then repeat their falls in endless cyclic succession.

- This parallels another structural scheme Joyce used in the book: the view of mythic history that he gleaned from the work of the 18<sup>th</sup>-century Italian philosopher Giambattista Vico.
  - Vico posited three ages of mythic time that could be seen in all civilizations: (1) a divine age, when God and humanity mingle; (2) a heroic age, when a series of great men arise above the human struggle and attain defining achievements; and (3) the human age, when the institutions of civilization are put in place.
  - Then, there follows the fourth age, what Vico terms the *ricorso*, or “return.” For Joyce, this corresponded to the apocalyptic cataclysm, in which the old order topples and we begin again, with a new divine age.
- Joyce was drawn to Vico’s system because of its cyclic view of history, unlike the 19<sup>th</sup>-century linear view.
  - Joyce also saw this mythic-historic pattern operating at the most private, individual level: It is the drama of the human family, moving from childhood to courtship and marriage, to the birth of children, to entry into the workplace, to the slow decline of old age, and finally, to death. Then, we witness the return, as the place of the old parents is taken by the young, who themselves come into their maturity, and the cycle continues.
  - As we saw in *Ulysses*, Joyce always seeks the macrocosm in the microcosm. Put differently, the universal is seen in the local. This is also the pattern of nature itself, which Joyce locates in the eternal flow of the rivers, as life emerges from the sea, flows across space and time, and finally, courses back into the sea to begin again.

## Anna Livia

- This pattern is precisely what Joyce depicts in the conclusion of the book. On the last page, he shows us the end of one age and the beginning of the next. The final part of *Finnegans Wake* belongs not to Earwicker and the male principle but to his wife, Anna Livia, the female principle. If Earwicker is often represented as a mountain, Anna is always the river, constantly flowing and ever changing.
  - The river is all waters: the amniotic waters of birth, the regenerative waters of baptism, the water of the washers at the ford—even the waters of the magical whisky that revives Tim Finnegan.
  - Throughout the *Wake*, Anna Livia courses and recourses, reviving her fallen husband, cleansing his reputation, carrying her children along in her flow, and like that “riverrun” with which the first page opens, flowing through all of myth, history, and civilization in her meanderings.
- At the book’s “end,” Anna is exhausted, longing to return to the sea from which she came. In the words that close this final page, we hear a recapitulation of nearly every theme, structure, motif, and idea of the book, and at the end, the page closes with the word “the.” Joyce described this word as “the weakest word in English, a word which is not even a word, which is scarcely sounded between the teeth, a breath, a nothing.” Weak in itself, perhaps, but this word wraps around to the opening word of page 1, “riverrun,” as the book refuses to end but continues in an endless, ongoing cycle.

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## Supplementary Reading

Campbell and Robinson, *A Skeleton Key to Finnegans Wake*.  
Joyce, *Finnegans Wake*.

## Questions to Consider

1. What would you say *Finnegans Wake* is “about”? What are the major themes, ideas, and concepts that make up this strange yet wonderful book?
2. Why do you think *Finnegans Wake* is written in the way it is? How is this form and style appropriate for what Joyce was trying to do?

# Patrick Kavanagh: After the Renaissance

**P**atrick Kavanagh was born in 1904; he was of the generation of Irish writers that would come of age in the wake of the Irish Revival. His father was a shoemaker and a farmer, and Kavanagh was raised to the same trades. He was intimately acquainted with both the realities of farm life and the constricted social realities of the Irish farm—a narrow world of work, religion, custom, loneliness, and poverty. He later wrote, “[Peasants] live in the dark cave of the unconscious and they scream when they see the light.” If Yeats had a sentimental and stereotypical view of Irish rural life, Kavanagh had a very real and even bitter understanding of its cultural and economic impoverishment.

### Kavanagh’s Early Career

- From early on, Patrick Kavanagh had a sense of being an outsider in his close rural community. He began writing verse as early as age 12, and by his early 20s, he had read a lot of contemporary Irish poetry and many classics of poetry. Kavanagh sent several of his poems to *The Irish Statesman*, edited by AE, that is, the poet and editor George Russell.
- In 1929 and 1930, Russell published three of Kavanagh’s poems, including what would become one of his most famous and definitive lyrics, “Ploughman.” Composed of four 4-line stanzas, the poem equates the ploughman’s labor with that of the artist, both engaged in the creation of a new world. The poem seemed to fit perfectly with the Irish Ireland movement—a celebration of the peasant life in a lyric poem that itself echoed that peasant labor.

- Russell encouraged Kavanagh, urging him to send in more poems and to come to Dublin. Thus, in December of 1931, Kavanagh set off by foot to walk to the great city and learn about a world beyond the narrow borders of the family farm. Russell would prove to be a guide and mentor to Kavanagh, reading and commenting on his poetry and placing it in some of the Dublin literary journals.
- Kavanagh returned to his farm but pursued his writing with greater vigor and commitment. He published additional poems in the small presses, and in 1936, published his first book-length collection, *Ploughman and Other Poems*. The book consisted of 31 poems, all of them short lyrics dealing with rural life in the Irish countryside.
- Some of the poems, such as “The Goat of Slieve Donard,” had a Yeatsian quality, alluding to “the herbs of wisdom” and the quasi-mythical elements in the Irish landscape. Others, such as “To a Blackbird,” were muted celebrations of the beauty of nature and the passing of the seasons on a farm. Several were deeply religious; for example, “To a Child” urges the child to retain its innocence and to find the light that “looks / inward to God.”
- But a number of the poems were much less celebratory of the peasant farmer’s life. In fact, a careful reading of Kavanagh’s lyrics suggests that he saw much to criticize in the life that the revivalists were so eager to celebrate. For example, he writes about the poverty of rural life, describing “the rags of hunger” and the unyielding ground that produces such a disappointing harvest.
- The isolation of the poet is also a theme that Kavanagh returns to repeatedly. In one poem, “Inniskeen Road: July Evening,” Kavanagh describes a country dance that the whole community attends. But the poet is excluded from this social gathering and, instead, remains in solitary contemplation, a kind of castaway on the fringes of social activity.
- For Kavanagh, the rural life was not something to be blithely celebrated, and by 1936, some of his poems were beginning to



Kavanagh's view of the peasant life was far from idyllic.

indicate resentment toward the sentimental and nostalgic ideas of that life, ideas that he knew were rooted in idealistic fantasy, not in a living knowledge of life on a small Irish farm.

### **Kavanagh as an Anti-Revivalist**

- Over time, Kavanagh seemed to sound this note of opposition ever more clearly. He came to see his effort as a poet to be one of resistance to the dominant modes of thought of the Irish Revival. Indeed, he became the most fervent of the anti-revivalist figures who emerged in the 1930s and 1940s.
- Although many Irish poets have struggled to find their own voice and subject matter in the wake of Yeats, Kavanagh didn't engage in a wholesale rejection of his predecessor. It was more the simplistic reading of Yeats or the simpler side of Yeats that

Kavanagh rejected. The valorization of the Irish peasant was what Kavanagh called “the English-bred lie.” He also condemned the Irish Ireland movement as a sentimental cliché and one that violated the reality of Irish identity.

- If Kavanagh rejected the revival and cultivated a careful attitude toward Yeats, he was far more admiring of James Joyce. Joyce rejected sentiment and nostalgia and was a bitter opponent of the easy romance of the Irish Revival. Kavanagh saw in Joyce a kindred spirit who had blazed the trail in fiction that he could follow in poetry.

### “The Great Hunger”

- Kavanagh’s focus on the local and on the question of Irish identity drove him in the composition of his longest and, to many, his greatest poem, “The Great Hunger,” a 756-line work, published in 1942. This is an effort at an Irish epic that would give voice to the national consciousness and evoke a national hero.
- However, like Joyce’s *Ulysses*, “The Great Hunger” is a mock epic. Its hero is a common farmer, Patrick Maguire, and the national consciousness it evokes is withered, sterile, dying, and wasted. The poem is Kavanagh’s rejection of the idealizations of the Irish Revival, his bursting of the illusions that he felt the sentimental revival had propagated.
- Kavanagh uses a third-person narrative voice to give the poem greater objectivity. He opens with a mock-invocation of the opening of John’s Gospel: “Clay is the word and clay is the flesh,” suggesting the omnipresent ground of the poem, the actual clay in which Maguire works his 14-hour days. The poem’s title, of course, refers to the great trauma of 19<sup>th</sup>-century Ireland, but here, the famine is spiritual, not physical. There is no food for the spirit in the world Kavanagh depicts.
- Maguire tends his mother faithfully until she dies at the age of 91. The poet states, “She stayed too long, / Wife and mother in one.”

Maguire's mother advised him to make the field his bride, and the cursed exchange of human love for love of the land is one of the poem's driving motifs. Frequently, Kavanagh makes Maguire into an archetypal figure, representative of all Irishmen or even of humanity itself, doomed to toil until death.

- Fertility and sterility are another guiding dynamic of the poem. Early in his adulthood, Maguire watched a girl cross his meadow, and he long remembers his attraction to her, but the combination of his devotion to the fields and his repressive experience with Catholicism compel him to associate love with sin.
- Kavanagh also suggests that Maguire had the potential to be a poet, but his poetry is stifled by the repression of his life. Part of the poem's impulse is to force on its readers the reality, as opposed to the fantasy, of the Irish peasant ideal; Kavanagh wants to rub his readers' noses in the lived reality of Irish rural life, to force them to acknowledge the grim, barren nature of that life.
- In one of the most famous parts of the poem, Kavanagh mocks the sentimental myth of the peasant:

The peasant has no worries;  
In his little lyrical fields He ploughs and sows;  
He eats fresh food,  
He loves fresh women,  
He is his own master  
As it was in the Beginning  
The simpleness of peasant life.

This is pure mockery, partly of Yeats and Gregory but more of the popularizers and simplistic nationalists for whom the peasant was the very essence of Irish identity.

- In fleeting moments of the poem, Kavanagh offers the needed counter to Maguire's loneliness and sterility, suggesting that there is another way to live, a more fulfilling and meaningful way, but

one that Maguire and most other men turn away from: “God is in the bits and pieces of Everyday,” the poet states. “A kiss here and a laugh again, and sometimes tears, / A pearl necklace round the neck of poverty.” But the poem ends with the speaker saying of Maguire, “He will hardly remember that life happened to him,” and its final images are those of meaninglessness, silence, and death.

## Kavanagh’s Later Writing

- Kavanagh continued to write poetry, as well as journalism, essays, and criticism, through the 1940s and early 1950s. He was embittered by his poverty and the lack of regard in which the poetic establishment held him; he gained a reputation as a caustic and critical voice in Dublin, as well as a frequenter of many pubs.
- But then in 1954, Kavanagh’s life changed. He was diagnosed with lung cancer and had surgery to remove one lung. He was not expected to survive the operation, but he did and slowly began to recover. He would recuperate sitting on a bench along the Grand Canal, and he soon began to identify the waters of the canal with the waters of baptism and rebirth, seeing his own recovery as precisely such a rebirth.
- His poetry from this period reflects a major shift from the bitter tone of “The Great Hunger.” Instead, this new poetry is light, simple, celebratory of the smallest details in life and dedicated not to the grim nature of tragedy but to the life-affirming impulses of comedy. In such poems as “Canal Bank Walk,” “Dear Folks,” and others, Kavanagh immortalized his sense of recovery and rejuvenation. He celebrated the “pleasant surprise” that he was still alive at age 50. He came to see his illness as a blessing.
- These poems speak of love and the fact that nothing can prevent it; they urge one to live in the moment; and they describe the will of God, which can be found in “the habitual, the banal.” The tomb Kavanagh now seeks is not the clay of “The Great Hunger” but, rather, “a canal-bank seat” where one can hear the water splashing.

- These poems are sonnets, the most traditional form of the lyric poem and the form generally devoted to expressions of love. Kavanagh uses bountiful images from nature and the rural world. He joins words together, such as “leafy-with-love banks,” and repeats forms for charm and effect, such as “so stilly greeny.” The poems have an almost childlike wonder at the world in them, and this second phase of Kavanagh’s poetry is a major reason that he remains such a beloved poet in Ireland.
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## Supplementary Reading

Kavanagh, *Collected Poems*.

Quinn, *Patrick Kavanagh*.

## Questions to Consider

1. How did Kavanagh differ from the Irish Renaissance poets who preceded him? In particular, how does his work contrast with the style, ideas, and methods of Yeats?
2. Describe the change in Kavanagh’s work and vision following his survival of cancer in the late 1950s. What effect did this experience have on Kavanagh’s late poetry?

# Modern Ireland in Paint and Glass

In 1864, the National Gallery of Ireland was officially opened in Dublin. Located in the heart of the Protestant Ascendancy area on Dublin's south side, next to the Duke of Leinster's mansion (now the seat of the Irish Parliament) and the Natural History museum and just a stone's throw from Trinity College, it was a signal achievement that showed the growth of Irish art in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The original collection came almost entirely from the homes and gifts of the Anglo-Irish aristocracy, and indeed, over the years, the estates of that class would continue to furnish the gallery with key additions to its collections.

## The Evolving Culture of Irish Art

- Irish art came into its own from the late 18<sup>th</sup> century onward, starting with the great Georgian architecture in Dublin and moving into significant work in painting and the visual arts in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The opening of the National Gallery was a signal event in this progression, although before the opening, most painters who emerged from Ireland had to migrate to London or Paris to find a culture that would support their work.
- A series of great landscape painters emerged in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, influenced by European romanticism and depicting the drama of the Irish scene in their paintings. They helped found the Royal Hibernian Academy in 1832, which was the first permanent site for the exhibition of art in Dublin.
- The great public buildings of Dublin date to the mid- to late 18<sup>th</sup> century, the heyday of the Georgian era. The Wide Streets



The Casino at Marino, built outside Dublin, is the triumph of neoclassical architecture in Ireland.

Commission was formed in 1757 and worked to open up the narrow, medieval lanes of Dublin, creating the grand avenues that would characterize the city. Along these new avenues, houses with the characteristic Georgian features were constructed, along with the city's greatest buildings: the Custom House, the Four Courts, and the King's Inns.

## Painting in Ireland

- In the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, landscape painting took hold in Ireland, as the uniquely beautiful and dramatic Irish scene offered exciting possibilities to painters. Historical painting also emerged as an important form, right at a time when Ireland's history was being scrutinized with greater intensity in the wake of the Act of Union, O'Connell's Catholic Emancipation movement, and the trauma of the Great Famine.

- The most notable example of historical painting from this era is Daniel Maclise's 1854 work, *The Marriage of Strongbow and Aoife*. This is a massive painting, measuring more than 10 by 16 feet. It was originally commissioned to hang in the Parliament in Westminster.



Waterford Crystal came into its own in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century; it would be resurrected a century later when the company became one of the greatest crystal makers in the world.

- The painting shows one of the most decisive events in Irish history, when Richard, earl of Pembroke, known as Strongbow, came to Ireland in 1172 to aid Dermot Macmurrough in his rivalry with Rory O'Connor for the kingship of Ireland. Strongbow's arrangement was to help Macmurrough in exchange for his daughter's hand in marriage and to become heir to his kingdom of Leinster in the eastern half of Ireland. Strongbow arrived with his Norman knights, and they conquered the native Irish, beginning the Norman conquest of Ireland.
- Maclise depicts the marriage of Strongbow to MacMurrough's daughter Aoife as both a grand pageant of celebration and a woeful trampling of the native Irish. At the center of the canvas we see Strongbow, in full black Norman armor, standing proudly, holding out his hand to Aoife. More Norman knights surround the couple on both sides, several on horseback, reminding the viewer of the Norman advantages of armor and cavalry. In the lower foreground, we see the dead and

dying Irish warriors, scantily dressed in traditional battle garb, muscular and impressive, with women wailing their demise.

- A sequence of vignettes and smaller dramatic actions takes place around the larger tableau. For example, in one area of the painting, we see the burning of a round tower and the destruction of an ancient church. The effect is to show the ruin of traditional Irish culture, with a sympathetic eye toward that culture, though also to suggest that the power of the Normans—and, by extension, of historical change itself—was not to be resisted.

## Celtic Revival in the Visual Arts

- The world of the visual arts was no exception to the growth of the Celtic Revival. Soon, a number of highly talented painters were depicting the Irish land and folk in exciting new ways, creating a distinctive, highly varied Irish artistic tradition.
- One of these painters was Nathaniel Hone, who in the 1890s, undertook a series of paintings that show the Irish countryside rendered through the techniques he had learned during his formative years in France. His apparently bucolic painting *Pastures at Malahide*—showing a grouping of cows in a pasture in the foreground—reveals a tempestuous and bold use of color and form.
- Another important painter of the late-19<sup>th</sup>-century Celtic Revival was Walter Osborne. In the 1890s, Osborne executed a particularly noteworthy series of street scenes in Dublin. The series includes such paintings as *The Fish Market*, *Patrick Street*, with its blend of gritty realism and poignant, almost nostalgic dreamy quality.

## Jack Yeats

- These painters and others who arose at this time began to open up the possibilities of Irish visual art. But without question, the most important painter to emerge from Ireland in the 20<sup>th</sup> century was the remarkable Jack Yeats, brother of W. B. Yeats.

- Born in London in 1871, Jack Yeats lived in Ireland full time between the ages of 8 and 16. His early experiences in Ireland were formative for Yeats and, in a sense, drove everything he did in his long career. He studied in England for a time; then, in 1905, he made an extensive tour of the Irish west, creating illustrations to accompany the sketches and articles J. M. Synge was writing about his travels in West Kerry and Connemara. He also illustrated Synge's *The Aran Islands*.
- This was a formative experience for Yeats. He encountered the western islands, the peasants and fisher-folk, and the Irish-speaking people of the west and engaged his skills as a painter to capture their lives and expressions. One of his famous watercolors from this period is *The Man from Aranmore*, a depiction of a rugged Aran Island fisherman.
- In the early 1900s, Yeats began to turn seriously to oil painting, about the same time he returned to Ireland and settled permanently there in 1910. It was in oil that his greatest achievements would occur.
- Yeats is a remarkably dramatic artist. Throughout his paintings, we see characters facing a moment of truth, a decisive action, or an opportunity for decision. His theme is the decisive encounter of man with the world and the existential moment when choice is required of us.
- In 1913, a major art exhibition was held at the U.S. National Guard Armories in New York. Known as the Armory Show, it introduced the American audience to the avant-garde painting emerging out of Europe in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Along with great continental painters displayed at the Armory Show was the work of Jack Yeats. Rather than the startling avant-garde images of cubism, Yeats chose to depict the peasants, rogues, clowns, ballad-singers, and tramps that he had come to know in the Irish west.

- Perhaps his most stunning achievement is the 1951 painting *Grief*, which Yeats produced four years after his beloved wife of 53 years had passed away. It is a magnificent display of color and emotion, ranging from the bright, possibly burning yellow and orange in the upper left of the picture to the blues and deep purples that pervade the entire canvas.
  - There is no clear human figure, though we can discern many possible figures: soldiers advancing, some perhaps fighting; a woman holding her baby, who may be bleeding; an old man observing everything with despair; and in the center, a rider atop a white horse—perhaps the pale horse and rider of Revelation.
  - The painting depends far less on representation than on suggestion. The main effect of the picture is a palette of deep blues and heavy purples, with splashes of orange and red, almost as if the paint itself were weeping or dripping down the canvas, like tears or blood or even the slow melting of the world.

## Harry Clarke

- Harry Clarke was the greatest stained-glass master of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He was born in Dublin in 1889, the son of a church decorator. He was apprenticed to his father's stained-glass workshop and attended the Dublin Metropolitan School of Art.
- Clarke's first large commission came in 1915, when he agreed to design the nine windows in the Honan Chapel of St. Finnbar's in Cork. These windows established his reputation and display all the characteristics of the Harry Clarke style: elongated features, enlarged eyes, poignant expressions, careful shading, and astonishing use of color.
- Clarke's reputation spread throughout the 1920s. Soon, he undertook his two great labors, the window of the Eve of St. Agnes

and the Geneva Window. The subject of the first of these was the great poem “The Eve of St. Agnes” by John Keats.

- The poem features a maiden named Madeline, who goes to sleep in her family’s castle dreaming of her lover, Porphyro, and awakens to find him beside her; together, they escape the castle and find freedom in the wild moors.
- Clarke tells the story through 14 panels, each featuring different moments in Keats’s poem. The characters are absolutely striking, and Clarke made a brilliant combination with his defining blues, as well as bright silvers and golds for royal effect.
- The Geneva Window was commissioned by the Irish state for the International Labour Court in Geneva, Switzerland. Clarke decided to depict scenes from 15 great works of Irish literature, drawing mainly on the modernist authors of the Irish Renaissance, including W. B. Yeats, Shaw, O’Casey, Joyce, Synge, Gregory, and others.
  - Clarke set to work beginning in 1927, but soon, objections were raised about the scandalous writers he was representing. President Cosgrave wrote to Clarke asking him to redesign the window without these authors depicted, but Clarke was unwilling to compromise his artistic vision.
  - During this same period, Clarke was diagnosed with tuberculosis. While fighting the disease, he continued working on the Geneva Window. Finally, he realized that his death was imminent, and he longed to return to his beloved Dublin. He began the journey back but died on the way. Meanwhile, the government rejected his window. Today, it hangs at the Wolfsonian Gallery at Florida International University in the United States.

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## Supplementary Reading

Arnold, *Jack Yeats*.

Bowe, *Harry Clarke*.

## Questions to Consider

1. What were the elements that made Jack Yeats such an extraordinary painter? In particular, how did his relationship to Ireland affect his work and his understanding of art?
2. How did Harry Clarke convey his characteristic sense of the human figure in stained glass? What effects and techniques did he use to communicate his unique sense of the human self?

# De Valera's Ireland: The 1930s

On August 11, 1927, Eamon de Valera signed the oath of allegiance to the Irish Free State and entered the Dáil Éireann as an elected representative of his new political party, Fianna Fáil. This was the same Eamon de Valera who had been the leader, in name at least, of the anti-Free State forces in the Irish Civil War and was imprisoned at the end of that war by the Irish government. He emerged from prison in 1924 and determined that political and parliamentary efforts were the best way for him to return to power and to lead Ireland in the future.

## De Valera's Return

- In 1926, Eamon de Valera resigned from Sinn Fein, the old anti-treaty political party. He established his new political party, Fianna Fáil, usually translated as “Soldiers of Destiny” or “Warriors of Ireland.”
- Fianna Fáil soon put forward a six-point political plan for Ireland: (1) to pursue the goal of a unified Irish Republic, (2) to restore the Irish language as the spoken language of the nation, (3) to make the resources of Ireland subservient to the needs of the Irish people, (4) to make Ireland self-sufficient economically, (5) to establish as many families on the land as possible, and (6) to promote industry in the countryside, not just the cities.
- Much of this program resonated with the Irish folk. The current ruling party, Cumann na nGaedheal, was identified with the wealthy, landed, bourgeois class. The Irish folk, overwhelmingly a

nation of farmers and rural workers, welcomed a political party that spoke to their interests.

- De Valera's party quickly mobilized throughout the countryside, taking up land reform and finance issues. De Valera, or "Dev" as he came to be known, also established his own newspaper, *The Irish Press*, to control the way in which the Irish people received and interpreted the news.
- In the general election of June 1927, Fianna Fáil won 44 seats, and Cumann na nGaedheal won 47, making Ireland for the first time a true two-party political system. In the next general election in 1932, Fianna Fáil won 72 seats, displacing Cumann na nGaedheal as the dominant party. Thus, not even 10 years removed from the Civil War, Ireland saw a peaceful transition of power from one side to another.
- With Fianna Fáil in power, de Valera's political efforts during the 1930s were decisive in shaping what we can term "Ireland after the Renaissance." The 1930s mark the end of the great cultural revival that began in the 1890s.
- Thus, one way we can understand the era of de Valera and Ireland in the 1930s is as a "post" sort of era—the period *after* the immensely hopeful and impressive achievements of the revival and renaissance. During the 1930s, Ireland entered a period when the poetic hopes and aspirations of independence met the prosaic realities of governance and legislation. The hard and mundane questions of realpolitik replaced the inspiring and simplified goals of freedom, self-determination, and independence.

## **Challenges and Achievements of de Valera's Era**

- De Valera had a remarkable capacity to describe whatever he was doing in a way that would be most calculated to win the people's approval, even if his actions were not necessarily positive. For example, his alternative to the treaty signed by Collins actually included the things for which he had he most criticized the

original treaty: dominion status for Ireland, partition of the North, recognition of the English monarch, and acceptance of Ireland's responsibility for its imperial debt. Yet he is mainly remembered for his heroic refusal to agree to precisely such terms.

- Similarly, de Valera publicly championed the idea of allowing small farmers not to pay the land annuities owed to the British government from land purchase loans prior to independence. This furthered his reputation as the friend of the rural population. In fact, the Irish farmers still had to pay the annuities, but they went to the Irish government instead of the British.
- De Valera's most prominent accomplishment throughout this decade was the gradual separation of Ireland from England, which he accomplished through a series of patient, yet bold, undertakings.
  - He shifted the position of the governor-general—basically, the figure of British representation and rule in Ireland—into an entirely ceremonial and powerless role, and he stripped it of the right to assent to Irish legislation.
  - In 1936, when King Edward VIII abdicated the throne, de Valera took advantage of the constitutional confusion to pass legislation that took out of the Irish constitution all mention of the British king or any other representative of the British crown. From there, he abolished the controversial oath of allegiance.
- Dev also waged what became known as the economic war with England. The British government was outraged when the Irish land annuity payments were suspended and responded by imposing import duties on a range of Irish goods. De Valera then responded with a similar economic embargo on British goods.
  - The ensuing economic war was devastating for Ireland, which had far fewer market alternatives than England did and a much smaller economy.

- The negative economic impacts, coupled with the larger worldwide financial depression of the 1930s, made it nearly impossible for Ireland to fulfill its promise of economic regeneration and self-sufficiency.
- De Valera's signal achievement of the period was the 1937 constitution, which was largely his own work. This constitution abolished the old governor-general position and created the office of the president. The prime minister, who would be the true source of executive power, was given the new name of *taoiseach*, the Irish word for "chief." Dev also created a deputy prime minister position, reduced the power of the Senate, and invested real legislative power with the Dáil Éireann.
- The full magnitude of de Valera's constitution consisted in its declaration of the Irish nation as a unique, Gaelic, and Catholic entity. A powerfully Catholic document, it also renamed the nation Éire, the Irish word for "Ireland." In the famous first article, Ireland declared its absolute national sovereignty and affirmed its political and cultural independence from Great Britain once and for all.
- Of course, the constitution could not accomplish what many Irish wished for: the reunification of the Northern 6 counties with the 26 counties of the newly established Irish nation. The Free State essentially refused to recognize the North, which didn't matter to the Ulster Unionist Party in the least; its hold on government was simply unshakable in Northern Ireland.

## The Irish Language in the 1930s

- As we have seen, during the Celtic Revival, the Irish language became a major symbol and vehicle for restoring and affirming the Irish identity. The Gaelic League, founded by Douglas Hyde in 1892, had as its mission the strengthening and spread of the Irish language throughout the country, and the language gained a vibrancy and poetic power during this time that saved it from extinction after the devastation of the Great Famine.

- With independence came the question of the status of the Irish language. The constitution of 1937 was written in both Irish and English, and where slight differences existed between the two languages, the Irish version would be the authoritative one. Irish and English had joint status as the official languages of the country.
- It was determined that the Irish language would have a special place in the educational curriculum of the new nation. Irish became compulsory for all students at the elementary, intermediate, and leaving certificate levels; all teachers had to have a knowledge of the Irish language; and instruction had to be in Irish wherever possible. Even if Irish was not the language in the home, it would be the language of the schools. For several generations of Irish children, the result was a dull resentment of Irish.

### **Irish Culture in the 1930s**

- In the post-Renaissance period, we see a certain gap developing between the ideals of traditional Irish culture and the cultural realities of the modern world.
- Radio began to broadcast in Ireland in 1926. This meant that American music came into Irish homes—jazz, swing, big band, and popular songs. But the impact of radio paled before the impact of the movies.
  - The 1930s were the decade of movie halls opening throughout the country, and soon, the Hollywood film was a dominant presence in Irish life. To the Irish, especially those in the countryside, Hollywood's depiction of life in America seemed a fantasy come true.
  - The allure of the Hollywood film was part of the fuel, along with the almost desperate economic situation, behind one of the other defining elements of Irish life in the 1930s: emigration.

- In 1929, Ireland passed the Censorship of Publications Act, an effort at cultural protectionism that went hand-in-hand with the independence movement and with the “authentic Ireland” movement. The impulse behind the Censorship Act was to keep Ireland pure and unsullied from the outside world, a world defined largely by British culture and, hence, anti-Irish, anti-Catholic, and anti-traditional. A main target of the act was what was described as “evil literature,” defined as writings calculated to express an alien and pagan moral worldview and associated mainly with modern, European, cosmopolitan, and experimental literature.
- This, in many ways, is the portrait of Ireland in the 1930s: impoverished, repressed, and isolated from the great happenings in Europe both culturally and politically. It was this milieu that prompted the poet Patrick Kavanagh to compose his bleak epic “The Great Hunger,” published in 1942. Yeats, too, was filled with a sense of the end of things, of the whole heroic effort of the renaissance period as no longer having purchase on the Irish imagination.

### Summing Up the 1930s

- We can understand the period that followed the renaissance as one in which the possibilities of great heroism gave way to the rather grim limitations of reality. Near-mythic historical figures, such as Patrick Pearse and Michael Collins, had vanished, to be replaced by all-too-human figures, including de Valera, a great bureaucrat but not an impassioned leader.
- Yet, as with all death, there would come new life. The mode of realism in Irish writing would soon lead to the flourishing of the Irish short story, which would dominate Irish literature throughout the 1930s to the 1950s and beyond.
  - It is fitting that this form—constricted, brief, almost incomplete—would be the distinctive Irish literary form after the grand heroic age of the renaissance. The 1930s was an abbreviated time—a time of constriction.

- It was a period when Ireland was struggling with the harsh realities of independence and trying to find its own identity after so many centuries of struggle. Yet it is precisely during this period that the most fundamental quality of the Irish identity—endurance—would prevail.
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## Supplementary Reading

Brown, *Ireland*.

Keogh, *Twentieth-Century Ireland*.

## Questions to Consider

1. How did the 1930s in Ireland compare with the Irish Renaissance decades that preceded it? What characterized this era, and why would the period following the renaissance turn out in this way?
2. In what ways did the poetic work of Kavanagh and Yeats capture the spirit of Ireland in the late 1930s? What were these two very different poets responding to, how did their visions differ, and what did they share?

# Seamus Heaney's Poetry of Remembrance

In 1939, World War II commenced. In the same year, W. B. Yeats died, and James Joyce published *Finnegans Wake*. De Valera's new constitution was just taking hold. Ireland was struggling to emerge from a decade of poverty and near-stagnation. And in April 1939, in County Derry in Northern Ireland, Seamus Heaney was born. If Yeats is the greatest Irish poet of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Heaney, without doubt, is the greatest Irish poet of the second half. And although it is too early to say what judgment history will render—Heaney just died in 2013—there are certainly those who would say that of the two, Heaney is the greater poet.



Heaney never reduced his sweeping, transhistorical perspective for the narrower, particular themes of his own historical era.

### Heaney's Early Life and Poems

- In 2015, Seamus Heaney's poem "When All the Others Were away at Mass" was chosen as Ireland's most-beloved poem. In it, the poet remembers himself as a boy, peeling potatoes with his mother and reveling in having her all to himself. Then he recalls those moments, many years later, as his mother breathed her last breath and he felt that closeness to her once again.

- These sorts of poems—intimate, loving, balancing the pain of loss with the joy of love—have made Heaney a resonant figure in the Irish imagination.
- Yet Heaney is also a poet utterly immersed in Irish history, politics, language, and culture. There is no figure in Irish literature of the last half-century with such a keen understanding of the Irish identity and how it was formed.
- Heaney was the eldest of nine children, born on a 50-acre farm called Mossbawn. His family bonds were strong, with loving parents who worked hard and valued education. In one of his earliest published poems, titled “Digging,” he recalls his father and grandfather with admiration.
  - In the poem, he defends his own vocation, writing, and compares it to the labor of his father. Where he dug into the earth to find sustenance and survival, Heaney digs, metaphorically, into the past and into language, mining words for their subterranean meanings and exploring the past to better understand the present.
  - For Heaney, digging is more than mere metaphor: It is the means by which a poet examines his roots. In effect, the challenge Seamus Heaney set for himself is a version of the challenge of this entire course: to go back into the Irish past to discover and understand the Irish Identity.
- One of the most fascinating of Heaney’s early rural poems is “The Diviner,” which tells the story of the local man who would come with his hazel stick, walk the land, and find the place of water where a well should be dug. Although the poet seems skeptical of this ancient mysticism, he is compelled to realize something inexplicable in the diviner’s power. Like the diviner, Heaney looks into the soil, which for him always stands for the Irish past and Irish spirit, to find life, water, and wisdom there.



His boyhood experiences in rural Northern Ireland marked Heaney forever; his imagination always goes back to life on a small family farm, connecting with the generations who lived a similar existence and admiring the tools and techniques of a self-reliant farming world.



The thatched-roof cottages that Heaney wrote about can still be found in remote valleys and abandoned farms in Ireland.

- This poem and others appeared in Heaney's first two volumes of poetry, *Death of a Naturalist* in 1966 and *Door into the Dark* in 1969. Perhaps the greatest of these early poems is "The Forge." In 14 masterful lines—a sonnet, the form of the love poem—Heaney describes the "door into the dark" that brings him into the blacksmith's forge.

### Heaney's "Mission" as a Poet

- In an essay written in 1974, titled "Mossbawn," Heaney describes his sense of what he is trying to do as a poet, namely, to express and understand what home had meant to him and how it affected his growth as a poet.
  - He begins with the Greek word *omphalos*, meaning the world navel, the center of all creation, and connects it to his family

farm, as the repetition of the word “becomes the music of somebody pumping water at the pump outside our back door.”

- This pump into the ground, seeking the life-giving water buried there, becomes a crucial image for the poet. He says later in the essay that it “marked an original descent into earth, sand, gravel, water. It centered and staked the imagination, made its foundation the foundation of the omphalos itself.” Heaney’s guiding metaphor of digging emerges here in the opening into the earth that began with that family farm.
- But we must be careful not to mistake Heaney for a poet of sentimental nostalgia or a romantic notion of what farm life entails. Another early poem, “Mid-Term Break,” shows the loss and anguish this life can contain, describing the death of his 4-year-old brother, hit by a car, when Heaney was 14. Heaney expresses the mystery and agony of death in this carefully constrained, artfully structured poem.
- In one of his defining poems, “Bogland” of 1969, Heaney describes the Irish bogs, that distinctive feature of the landscape that is formed when heavy rainfall combines with the acidic soil to create thick layers of peat.
  - Heaney looks at the phenomenon of the Irish bogs and sees a metaphor for Ireland itself because the bogs preserve whatever becomes buried in them. Bodies from centuries ago have been unearthed in the bogs almost wholly preserved.
  - We can see how this concept struck a chord with Heaney’s idea of digging into the ground to find infinite mysteries: As Heaney says in the poem’s final line, “The wet centre is bottomless.”
- Heaney became increasingly interested in the Irish bogs in his poetry of the 1970s. In 1969, he read a fascinating work by a Danish archaeologist describing the discovery of bodies in the bogs of Scandinavia, some of whom had clearly been murdered.

- The author demonstrated that these bodies were, in fact, more than 2,000 years old. He also showed that these apparent murder victims were the objects of ritual sacrifice—in most cases, probably royal figures, princes, and leaders, who were sacrificed for the mystic preservation of the community.
- For Heaney, this background on the “bog bodies” struck him like a lightning flash. He had already begun to explore the Irish bogs; now he saw in the northern European bogs a whole constellation of symbolic, ritualistic, religious, and social meaning that he felt could also apply to Ireland.

## Heaney and Northern Ireland

- In 1969, Heaney was also thinking about the political situation in Northern Ireland, the growing civil unrest, and the increasingly violent confrontations between Catholics and Protestants. In that same year, the Provisional IRA broke away from the older, less active IRA and began its campaign of covert warfare against both the British government and the loyalist/Protestant police and paramilitary forces in Northern Ireland. The result would be the long conflict called the Troubles, which would rage until at least the Good Friday Agreement of 1998.
- Heaney was a member of the Catholic minority in the Protestant-dominated North. He grew up aware of the divisions in the land, the always-present possibilities for violence, and the social structure of injustice and oppression that all Catholics in the North faced. But he also was aware of the historical complexity of the Northern situation.
- One of the most learned, deeply intellectual poets of his era, Heaney sought in his poetry ways to understand and respond to the centuries of strife and the social and cultural divides of his native land. Thus, for him, the idea of ritual sacrifice of the bog bodies to preserve a war-torn and violent community seemed both an ancient form of religious justice and a perfect metaphor for understanding the contemporary situation in Northern Ireland.

- In such poems as “Bog Oak,” “The Tollund Man,” and “Bog Queen,” Heaney explored the full meanings of the bog burials, the rituals of sacrifice and killing, and the parallels to Northern Ireland that he saw therein. In one poem, he meditates on the thin line between “civilized outrage” and “tribal, intimate revenge,” sensing that the contemporary time of so-called civilization is just as violent and tribal as the cultures of thousands of years ago.
- Heaney’s relations and reactions to the violence in Northern Ireland became a complicated matter in the 1970s. During this time, Heaney left Ulster, first for the United States, then to County Wicklow in the Republic of Ireland. Here, in a cottage called Glanmore, Heaney composed the volume that stands as his single greatest achievement. *North*, published in 1975, combines poems of sacrifice and history with those detailing the violence in Northern Ireland.

### Heaney’s Later Career

- In the 1980s, Heaney collaborated with several other writers and actors on the Field Day movement, which was a journal, a theater project, and a publishing venture that sought to attain a kind of cultural pluralism in Ireland.
- In 1995, Heaney received the Nobel Prize for Literature. The award recognized his “works of lyrical beauty and ethical depth, which exalt everyday miracles and the living past.”
- Heaney continued to produce significant poetry in the new century. In 2006, he brought out *District and Circle*, a volume of poetry that consciously recalled his best earlier work, while featuring such subjects as the 9/11 attacks and the 2005 terrorist bombings on the District and Circle lines of the London underground.
- When Heaney died in 2013, at the relatively young age of 73, he was remembered as perhaps Ireland’s most beloved poet, almost an amalgam of the lyricism of Yeats, the linguistic brilliance of Joyce, and the common touch of Kavanagh.

- There is perhaps no more appropriate figure with whom to conclude our investigation into Irish identity, history, and literature than Seamus Heaney. He provides us with a perfect lens through which to look back on the Irish Renaissance and, indeed, on the long saga of Irish history and culture.
    - He was born into a world quite similar to the traditional Irish countryside that Gregory traversed in her searches for folklore and that Yeats celebrated in his poems about the Sligo woods and lakes. Heaney understood not just the world of the Irish Renaissance but also the deep historical roots that led to that world.
    - His metaphor of digging into the Irish landscape and, thence, into the Irish past meant that, as much as any other Irish writer in the tradition, Heaney had a deep understanding of the long historical struggle that has gone into shaping what Yeats termed “the indomitable Irishry.”
    - The defining feature of the Irish may well be their connection to the land of Ireland. This, after all, is what the great Irish drive toward independence amounted to: the right to claim the land as their own. We, then, are like Heaney, digging down into the soil, trying to sift through the many levels of Irish history, Irish culture, and Irish poetry and finding there one of the most remarkable peoples in the history of the world.
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## Supplementary Reading

Heaney, *Finders Keepers*.

———, *Opened Ground*.

———, *Selected Poems, 1988–2013*.

## Questions to Consider

1. In what ways did Seamus Heaney give voice to Irish life in the latter decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century? How did he respond to the sweep of Irish history, literature, and culture that we have explored in this course?
2. Heaney's central, defining metaphor is that of digging. How does this metaphor function for him in terms of history, family, myth, and the Irish identity?

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